

The Gospel of Freedom
By Arnold Kling
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"I am never sure how many people really yearn for liberty. I wish more of them did."

--Tyler Cowen

The Acton Institute has produced the most subversive movie I have ever seen. The Call of the Entrepreneur, which is being released on an agonizingly slow schedule, is a threat to tyranny everywhere, including here at home.

The movie's message is that entrepreneurs are creators of wealth, Wall Street financiers are enablers of economic progress, and the villains of the world are people like the Communist leaders in China and American religious leaders who rail against capitalism. It features three passionate champions of freedom:

--an American dairy farmer who literally created a successful small business out of cow manure. You see the man and his teenage children holding the manure in their hands and smelling it, as they demonstrate their process for turning it into marketable compost;

--a merchant banker, Frank Hanna III, who explains how financial institutions spread risk, lower the cost of borrowing, and enable businesses to expand. He explicitly contradicts the zero-sum, beggar-thy-neighbor view of finance as typically depicted in the Hollywood movie Wall Street.

--a Hong Kong entrepreneur, who tells the story of his escape from Communist China, including emotional accounts of his reactions to reading Friedrich Hayek's The Road to Serfdom and to seeing the Tiananmen square massacre. In light of our recent battles over immigration, it is interesting to see that his mother's sister paid for him to be smuggled from Communist China to Hong Kong in the early 1960's, and that Hong Kong granted him automatic citizenship as soon as he landed.

The G Word

When I was in elementary school in the early 1960's, public schools in America still taught the virtues of freedom and the American way of life. In those days, a movie like "Call of the Entrepreneur" might have been shown in high school.

Today, I can imagine "The Call of the Entrepreneur" being shown to people in other countries. It has already been viewed by a large preview audience in Africa. I would like to see it translated into Arabic and shown in the Middle East. But it has very little chance of being shown in public high schools in America. It is far too explicit. "Call of the Entrepreneur" features the Reverend Robert A. Sirico, including a full-frontal shot of his clerical collar. As producer Jay W. Richards points out, the movie uses "the G word."

As a Jew, I am certain that I missed a number of the religious aspects of the movie. There were subtle references to Christian doctrine that went right past me. Perhaps there are

Christians who would be more aware of the context and, based on their knowledge, might even take offense at the film's stance. I imagine that passionate atheists would tend to be turned off. But I think that a typical high school student could be exposed to the religion in "Call of the Entrepreneur" without being permanently scarred or corrupted.

I would argue that "Call of the Entrepreneur" and "An Inconvenient Truth" are both religious films. However, unlike Al Gore's movie about global warming, "Call of the Entrepreneur" steers clear of sensationalism, dogma, and misleading half-truths. It is ironic that public teachers and parents are happy to see "An Inconvenient Truth" in the classroom, but "Call of the Entrepreneur" would probably be greeted with protests if it were shown.

Religion vs. Rationalism

Recently, David Brooks wrote a column contrasting the outlook of President Bush with that of Leo Tolstoy. He sees President Bush as emphasizing the importance of personal leadership.

Tolstoy had a very different theory of history. Tolstoy believed great leaders are puffed-up popinjays. They think their public decisions shape history, but really it is the everyday experiences of millions of people which organically and chaotically shape the destiny of nations — from the bottom up.

According to this view, societies are infinitely complex. They can't be understood or directed by a group of politicians in the White House or the Green Zone. Societies move and breathe on their own, through the jostling of mentalities and habits. Politics is a thin crust on the surface of culture.

If President Bush believes in the importance of individual leaders, then he is not alone. For example, Brad DeLong recently wrote,

in 1978 China had its first piece of great good luck in a long, long time--perhaps the first time some important chance broke right for China since the end of the Sung dynasty. China acquired as its paramount ruler one of the most devious and effective politicians of this or indeed any age, a man who was quite possibly the greatest human hero of the twentieth century: Deng Xiaoping.

The Chinese entrepreneur featured in "Call of the Entrepreneur" has a different view. Suffice to say, he would not use "Deng Xiapoing" and "human hero" in the same sentence.

I see President Bush as motivated by a passion to convert people in the underdeveloped world to the cause of freedom. However, I agree with Tolstoy that societies must be shaped from the bottom up, and I agree with Brooks' implication that Tolstoy would view the attempt to impose modern institutions on Iraq through the sheer will of our leadership as unrealistic. Finding the right balance between religion and rationalism is difficult. In my opinion, President Bush's good intentions concerning Iraq were not tempered by sufficient rationalism.

Generally speaking, however, I think that our own society could use a rekindling of the passion for freedom and fewer attempts to rationalize expansion of the state. I hope that "The Call of the Entrepreneur" is seen by enough people here and around the world to realize its subversive potential. I hope that it can stimulate more of us to yearn for liberty.

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