

"Life, Liberty and..."

by ROBERT CLANCY

"WE hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

If there is an American credo, this is the heart of it. Penned by Thomas Jefferson, these words from the Declaration of Independence were accepted by the other leaders of the American revolution.

We can readily understand life and liberty as basic rights, but why "the pursuit of happiness"? This phrase involves a development of thought that went on for 150 years in the 17th and 18th centuries and has its roots deeper still.

In the 17th century, philosophers felt the need of rethinking through the foundations of knowledge, of existence, of the social order. Scientific discoveries and a general awakening had thrown into disorder the absolute certainties of medieval theology. Descartes sought certainty on the basis of "I think, therefore I am." Francis Bacon proposed the reconstruction of knowledge on an inductive basis.

Social philosophers, like Hobbes, tried to figure out a basis for the social order by getting down to nature, to natural conditions and tendencies, and building up carefully from scratch. Out of this intellectual ferment of a century and a half came the concept of natural rights. It was by no means a dreamy concoction, as some modern writers seem to think, but a laborious reconstruction based solidly on nature, observation and reason.

Nature gives life, so the right to life is natural. Man must work in order to survive, therefore he has a right to his personal powers. A social order is possible only so long as men agree not to

harm one another. And so this philosophic quest progressed. John Locke represents a landmark in this development and his thought influenced most of the later thinkers of the Enlightenment, including Jefferson. Locke wrote in his essay on government: "The earth and all that is therein is given to men for the support and comfort of their being . . . Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person. This, nobody has any right to but himself. The labor of his body and the work of his hands we may say are properly his . . . For this labor being the unquestionable property of the laborer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others."

Here Locke is seeking sanction in the natural order for the social order. Henry George is mining this same vein when he says: "Nature acknowledges no ownership or control in man save as the result of exertion. In no other way can her treasures be drawn forth, her powers directed, or her forces utilized or controlled."

After a good start Locke went off at a tangent by justifying exclusive property in land in order that a person might have secure access to the materials of nature—thus falling into the same trap as did John Stuart Mill later. Locke's rights are "life, liberty and property," and English landlords found their justification in this philosophy.

The question of property in land, and property in wealth, never became clear-cut but became merged in the word "property."

Jefferson struggled with the concept and although he never resolved the question of the two kinds of property, he saw that there was something wrong

in England with great wealth on the one hand and great poverty on the other. He saw too that the condition of the common man was greatly improved in America. He concluded after a great deal of thought that property was not a *natural* right, but was an arrangement created by government, a social gift—in fact a late development—and that the arrangements could be changed by society.

The substitution of "happiness" for "property" goes back to Aristotle, and even beyond. Aristotle recognized happiness as the chief end of man, and although much of Aristotle was being discarded, this point was accepted by thinkers of the Enlightenment. The quest for happiness is a natural inborn trait of man, and the social order must aid man in this, otherwise it is not serving its purpose.

A condition of happiness, Jefferson thought, required more than mere survival. There should be a degree of comfort and freedom from want and insecurity, so that man's mind might be free to pursue his true end. However, although some American leaders formulated "life, liberty and security" — to Jefferson "security" did not express the thought he was after. Some of his colleagues included all five—life, liberty, property, security and the pursuit of happiness.

I suppose it could be said that right-wingers would emphasize property and left-wingers would emphasize security. While Jefferson did not entirely clarify property he was aware that as a right it could be abused by owners of slaves as well as by large landowners. He must also have realized that security as a right could have led to excessive demands on the government, as indeed it has done in our day. We know that he wanted the least government possible, but at

the same time he saw the role of government as essential. Government should not feed the people, but it should see to it that opportunities were there for the people to feed themselves.

In singling out "the pursuit of happiness" among the alternatives, after life and liberty, Jefferson was using careful deliberation, not merely composing rhetoric.

It is interesting that Jefferson's colleagues of the revolution who inspected his draft of the Declaration, made a number of revisions—mostly in toning down his religious language, his bill of particulars against George III, and unfortunately his denunciation of slavery—but even so, they left intact his trio of rights, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The evolution of thought of the Enlightenment culminated in declarations of the rights of man in the American and French revolutions. But though the roots were deep and wide-ranging, the chief fruit at that time was political reform. The leaders of those days diverted their attention to the techniques of democratic government, the assurance of a fair jury trial and other civil rights.

But abuses remained, particularly in the economic domain, as was proven by the industrial troubles that followed. Thinkers wrestled with these problems, but it remained for Henry George to show that the solution lay in going back to the principles of the Enlightenment and the revolution and applying them in the economic as well as the political domain. George said the revolution was not finished and that its implications must be followed through. The right to the fruit of one's labor and the right of access to land must be more fully recognized and implemented, and George showed the way.

•
This article and the one following by Stan Rubenstein are excerpts from addresses given at the annual Henry George School conference in Miami Beach, Florida, July 4, 1968.