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'True Americanism'



What German-born American immigrant said, “My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right”?

What German-born American immigrant became a leading member of the Republican Party, supported William Seward for president in 1860 but when Abraham Lincoln secured the nomination eagerly supported him?

What German-born American immigrant served as a major general in the Union Army during the Civil War, commanded divisions at the battles of Second Bull Run, Chancellorsville, Chattanooga, Gettysburg, and, as the war neared its end,

was in North Carolina with Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's army as Sherman concluded his march to the sea?

What German-born American immigrant, while working as an editor in St. Louis after the war, hired a young, neophyte reporter named Joseph Pulitzer?

What German-born American immigrant served as a U.S. senator from Missouri in the 1870s and later as Secretary of the Interior?

What German-born American immigrant was also a lawyer and played the piano? (In the photo in the middle above, he is playing the piano at the White House for President Rutherford B. Hayes and his family.)

What German-born American immigrant, although it might or might not have warmed that staunch old Yankee Washington Irving's heart, is buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Sleepy Hollow, New York?

What German-born American immigrant, last and most importantly, at Faneuil Hall in Boston on April 18, 1859, delivered one of the most powerful defenses of the *American Creed* ever voiced – his "True Americanism" speech?

Carl Schurz.



Last week, in preparing the [*Note about Heather Cox Richardson's Democracy Awakening*](#), needing to verify a quotation from Alexander Stephens' "Corner-Stone Speech," I consulted my Library of America copy of ***American Speeches: Political Oratory from the Revolution to the Civil War*** and in one of those serendipitous discoveries that makes research so enjoyable, I noted Carl Schurz's "True Americanism." Having known about it for years but, admittedly, not having ever actually read it and needing to breathe some clean air after the noxious vapors of Stephens' anti-American screed, I read Schurz. Even after 165 years, it speaks to our culture war fractured times and restores one's faith in the American Creed and the inclusive thread in the many threads of ***The American Tapestry Project***. Relishing its restorative powers, I decided to save it and share it with you this week.

So, in addition to those biographical teaser questions with which we began, who was Carl Schurz?

Obviously, Schurz was a testament to the glory of the American immigrant experience. Before that, however, this graduate of the University of Bonn was born in Germany in 1829, and was raised as a Roman Catholic and educated by Jesuits at the Jesuit Gymnasium in Cologne. (A *gymnasium* in the old German system of education was roughly equivalent to an American college preparatory high school but with a more demanding curriculum, which included much of what in America now is the first year of a university or collegiate education).

As Schurz recounts, having been exposed to the idea of America early in life when a neighboring family emigrated to America and later through reading books about American history, "(he) began to exercise his brain with thoughts what man (*sic*) might be and become, when left perfectly free to himself." [1] Thus inspired by the idea of America, Schurz joined the revolutionary vanguard that in 1848 attempted to overthrow the German monarchy. A benchmark year in European history, 1848 is known as the "year of revolutions" when throughout Europe, but particularly in France and Germany, young idealists sought to shake off the shackles of monarchy.

They lost, but in the long arc of history their efforts signaled the beginning of monarchy's end. After the movement's defeat in Germany, Schurz first fled to Switzerland, then France and England. From England, in 1852 he joined the flood of other immigrants entering America from both Ireland and Germany. The Germans were largely the "48ers" fleeing the failed revolution while the Irish were impoverished peasants fleeing the famine. Both groups, however, were largely Roman Catholics and represented the first significant wave of non-English, non-Protestant immigrants in American history. Now in the promised land, they encountered signs saying, "No Rum and Romanism" and "Irish Need Not Apply."

Schurz transcended it all.

After first settling in Philadelphia, he and his wife Margarethe migrated farther west to Watertown, Wisconsin. There, Schurz, a university graduate fluent in both German and English, became a major figure in the German-American community. He studied law and was admitted to the Wisconsin bar, but soon became deeply enmeshed in politics. An ardent champion of liberty and a staunch abolitionist, he joined the emerging radical Republican Party because of its commitment to liberty. By the late 1850s he was a major figure in Wisconsin and Republican politics.

In 1859, Schurz went to Boston to defend the Republican Party and refute claims that it was nativist and anti-freedom. In that era, the nativists, ancestors of 21st century anti-immigrant bigots like Stephen Miller, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, and former President Donald Trump (curiously, all are either the son, grandson

or great-grandson of immigrants), screeched all the familiar tropes about immigrants polluting the culture and bellowed “America for Americans.” The most famous (infamous?) was the American Party, whose members, when asked about its activities, said, “I know nothing.” History has rewarded them by memorializing them as “Know-Nothings.”

Back to Boston’s Faneuil Hall on April 18, 1859, Schurz began his defense of his western party (in 1859 Wisconsin was the “west”) by pointing out he could not be a nativist because he was born in a foreign land. He said, “I, born in a foreign land, pay my tribute to Americanism? Yes, for to me, the word Americanism, true Americanism, comprehends the noblest ideas which ever swelled a human heart with noble pride.” [2] He continued, saying he was there because fleeing the failed revolutions of old Europe, “America and Americanism ... appeared to me as the last depositories of the hopes of all true friends of humanity.” [3] A true conservative, America, he said, was “the last spot on earth where man is free to follow the road to attainable perfection, and where unbiased by the disastrous influence of traditional notions, customs, and institutions, he acts on his own responsibility.” [4]

It is a sentiment that 165 years later we appear to need to relearn because Supreme Court Justices Samuel Alito, Clarence Thomas, and Amy Coney Barrett, Roman Catholics all, and others on the reactionary right seem oblivious to it. Anticipating them, Schurz proclaimed that America was “destined to produce everlasting results, unless recklessly overthrown by imbecile generations.” [5]

I should hasten to add that, in 2024, “imbecile generations” come in all partisan flavors, right and left, as left-leaning American critics continue to point out all the times it has failed to live up to its ideals implying that such failures invalidate the ideals. It is a notion I reject, but Schurz said it better. As pertinent today as it was in 1859, he countered those critics by noting that “ideals are like stars; you will not succeed in touching them with your hands. But like the seafaring man on the desert of the waters, you choose to follow them as your guides, and following them you will reach your destiny.” [6]

The great genius of America has been its daring experiment in self-government all the while seeking to mingle people from every corner of the globe. History teaches us that the former has rarely succeeded and the latter only after much blood and suffering. Schurz begins with his sterling defense of immigration as a great boon and benefit to American society – after all, we are a nation of immigrants. Speaking specifically about the Irish and German Roman Catholic influence on America’s predominantly English and Protestant culture, Schurz pointed out “They modify each other, and their peculiar characteristics are to be blended together by the all assimilating power of freedom. This is the origin of

the American nationality, which did not spring from one family, one tribe, one country, but incorporates the vigorous elements of all civilized nations on earth.” [7]

Understanding that the pressures of civilizational shifts results in people moving about the globe, as is happening today on our southern border and in Europe through the migration from the Middle East, Schurz sees human progress as “from time to time, violent, irresistible hurricanes sweep over the world, blowing the most different elements of the human family together, which by mingling reinvigorate each other, and the general confusion then becomes the starting point of a new period of progress ... mankind becomes young again by its different elements being shaken together, by race crossing race, and mind penetrating mind.” [8]

Regarding self-government, Schurz celebrates the rise of individualism resulting from “the reformatory movement of the 16th century’s” rejection of papal authority but notes not even the English could make the final leap to separating church from state. That task was left to America, child of England, “*the great colony of free humanity* (italics in the original) which has not old England alone, but the world, for its mother-country.” [9] This epochal shift in human history, this rejection of theocratic government that made the greatness of America possible, is now, in 2024, once again under assault. Schurz’s voice, echoing down those 165 years, brings us back to our origins and “true Americanism.”

Similarly, he notes that the frequent comparison of America to first the Roman republic then empire misses the entire point of the genius of self-government, for the Romans were America’s inferiors. In rejecting claims of Roman greatness, Schurz says, “the greatness of the Roman republic consisted in its despotic rule over the world; the greatness of the American republic consists in the secured right of every man to govern himself. The dignity of the Roman citizen consisted in his exclusive privileges; the dignity of the American citizen consists in his holding the natural rights of his neighbor just as sacred as his own.” [10] For in America, Schurz asserts, “in the colony of free humanity, whose mother country is the world, (is) established *the Republic of equal rights, where the title of manhood (sic) is the title of citizenship.*” (Italics in the original) [11]

Why is this important? Because in America, unlike Rome, the security of the republic does not rely upon the sword. As Schurz asserts, “the security of the American Republic rests upon the equality of human rights.” [12] In other words, again as true today as in 1859, regardless of how militarily strong America might be, if it sacrifices individual freedom, then it sacrifices the *idea* of America. Whatever it will be, it will no longer be *America*.

Where is this idea stated? In the Declaration of Independence, for as Schurz continues, “I wish the words ... ‘that all men are created free and equal, and are endowed with certain unalienable rights’ were inscribed upon every gate-post within the limits of this Republic.” [13] Remember from last week, these are precisely the words that Alexander Stephens, the rebellious South, and 21st century reactionaries reject, but for Schurz they are the very foundation of the American experiment. Why? As Schurz states, America is “the living incarnation of this idea ... it contains the programme of our political existence. It is the most progressive, and at the same time the most conservative one; the most progressive, for it takes even the lowliest members of the human family out of their degradation and inspires them with the elevating consciousness of equal human dignity; the most conservative, for it makes common cause of individual rights.” [14]

Most importantly, Schurz continues, “this general identity of interests is the only thing that can guarantee stability of democratic institutions. Equality of rights, embodied in general self-government, is the great moral element of true democracy; it is the only reliable safety-valve in the machinery of modern society ... (it) is the solid foundation of our system of government; there is our safety; there, and nowhere else! This is true Americanism, and to this I pay the tribute of my devotion.” [15]

What threatens this *idea* of America? Despots, both actual and wannabe. In Schurz’s time it was the southern slavocracy and, in the eyes of some, papal Rome; in our time, it is a resurgent religious nationalism piercing the veil of separation of church and state to impose narrow sectarian religious values upon everyone.

Why is this such a threat? Because, as Schurz said 165 years ago, “you cannot deny one class of society the full measure of their natural rights without imposing restraints upon your own liberty. If you want to be free, there is but one way; it is to guarantee an equally full measure of liberty to all your neighbors. There is no other.” [16]

How to counter the enemies of liberty, particularly those fueled with religious righteousness now fouling America? It is not to meet the religious fanatic with equal fanaticism, for in such combat you sacrifice your own values. It is to recommit to a foundational American value embedded in the First Amendment that gives freedom of religious expression to all but domination to none. For, as Schurz continues, “Against fanaticism genuine democracy wields an irresistible weapon – it is toleration. Toleration will not strike down the fanatic, but it will quietly and gently disarm him. ... True Americanism, toleration, the equality of

rights, has absorbed their prejudices, and will peaceably absorb everything that is not consistent with the victorious spirit of our institutions.” [17]

Sadly, that was not true in Schurz’s time. During the American Civil War, he would eventually command armies fighting for those principles. In our time, I wrote in the margins of my copy, “not in 2024.” To avoid the civil war that Schurz’s belief in Americanism could not avoid, what must we do? We must recommit to our values; we must resist through the democratic process those who would be tyrants. And we must, like Schurz, never stop preaching the American Creed – the value of “true Americanism.” [18] What does that mean? It means, like Thomas Jefferson, who, Schurz quotes, “would rather be exposed to the inconveniences arising from too much liberty, than to those arising from too small a degree of it.” As Schurz noted, “It is a matter of historical experience that nothing that is wrong in principle can be right in practice.” [19]

What might that mean? Be exceedingly suspicious of every effort to limit your rights and to denigrate one’s political opponents. Regarding the latter, Schurz says, “When a political party in power ... (has) once adopted the policy of knocking down their opponents instead of voting them down, there is an end of justice and equal rights.” [20] Think January 6 insurrectionists. Or, referring to southern states declaring abolitionist speeches illegal, Schurz pointed out that “Of all the dangers and difficulties that beset us, there is none more horrible than the hideous monster, whose name is ‘Proscription for opinion’s sake.’” [21] “Proscription” is censorship. In our time, think of libraries and school districts banning books, Florida seeking to criminalize a professor’s speech that the government dislikes, and the alleged determination by supporters of former President Donald Trump, should he be elected again, to enforce the degraded Comstock Act of 1873.

What is Schurz’s antidote for all of that? It is to reassert America’s foundational values found in the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the rule of law. It is, to use an example from a century after Schurz’s famous speech, another glorious defense of “true Americanism.” It is to reassert Martin Luther King, Jr.’s exhortation that “the greatness of America is the right to protest for rights.” [22] “True Americanism” and, therefore, a true American agrees with Schurz that the answer to the questions do we believe in the American Creed and can we govern ourselves is a “triumphant ‘Aye,’ thundering into the ears of the despots ... that is true Americanism, clasp[ing] mankind to its great heart.” [23]

Yet, as in 1859, in our time, not everyone agrees. Once again, we see the specter of anti-democratic (not the party but the concept of free government), of anti-liberty forces afoot in American society seeking to limit individual rights. Sometimes they come cloaked in the anti-freedom name of some religious *ism* seeking freedom for themselves but not for you; sometimes they come cloaked in

the vile garments of a resurgent racism; sometimes they come veiled in anti-women misogyny; always they come, regardless of the costume, opposing liberty for all save those that favor their own creed, custom, or values. And always, seeking comfort in subservience to a master, they celebrate the one who says, “Only I can fix it;” “I will protect you;” and “I will be your vengeance.”

Why is that?

I think there are two reasons.

Responding to last week’s **Book Note** on Richardson’s **Democracy Awakening**, Ned, a reader from Cleveland, sent a very insightful series of comments. While he meant them in response to Richardson, they are equally applicable to Schurz. Maybe more applicable to Schurz, because they speak to both issues I just described: the rejection of the American Creed and the flight from freedom that continually reappears not only in American history but elsewhere. Ned points out that “the American Creed is as revolutionary today as it was in the 1789.” In 1789, the U.S. Constitution declared that “We the People...” not some divinely ordained despot, created this government to form a more perfect Union. The notion that the people could create their own government, which seems almost banal to us 200-plus years later, was stunningly revolutionary in 1789 for a simple reason. It had never been done before. Why? Because the *people* were never free to do it. Today, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orban, and the Iranian ayatollahs would say “nor should they be.” Certain American reactionary, wannabe theocratic right-wingers apparently agree.

Likewise, in 1776, the Declaration of Independence’s assertion that “all men are created equal” was arguably one of the most revolutionary pronouncements in human history. It still is, as the suspects noted above, among many others, continually demonstrate their opposition to that radical notion. You don’t need to go global to find those who reject that statement. Forget Alexander Stephens and the southern slavocracy; simply listen closely to any politico, blogger, podcaster, or social media troll venting about “those people,” “femanazis,” “immigrant scum and rapists,” “gay and trans weirdos” and you will instantly identify a Declaration of Independence denier.

Sadly, they are everywhere.

Reader Ned also noted the current tendency spreading across the entire political spectrum, right and left, that believes if you can ban an expression of an idea than you’ve killed it. Book banning on the right; cancel culture on the left. Ned sees in that a pattern that recurs and recurs in history: people seeking to “escape

from freedom” and into the arms of a “man on horseback” who will supposedly create order and stability in exchange for your loss of freedom.

I think Ned is on to something. In future **Book Notes**, we’ll explore, as historian Gordon Wood called it, the radicalism of the American Revolution and just how radical, how earthshaking, the *idea of America* really is. We’ll try to answer the question, “Why do Americans seem to increasingly not believe in the *idea of America*, the American Creed, while the rest of the world does?” For as, Neil Diamond sang, “they’re still coming to America” seeking freedom, equality, and opportunity. Curiously, the new Americans I know think they’ve found it.

We’ll also revisit Ned’s notion of an “escape from freedom.” We touched on it in a recent **Book Note** on Eric Hoffer’s *The True Believer*, but it deserves a further look. To prepare, I’m going to re-read Erich Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*.

In the meantime, hold on to Schurz’s passionate belief in “true Americanism,” the American Creed, and the notion that America is at its best when it is being *America*, which is its deep and abiding belief in liberty, equality, and opportunity.

Although I quoted liberally from it, you can read Schurz’s “True Americanism” in its entirety at [Speeches of Carl Schurz/03 True Americanism - Wikisource, the free online library](#)



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End Notes

1. Schurz, Carl, *“True Americanism”* in **American Speeches: Political Oratory from the Revolution to the Civil War**. (New York: The Library of America, 2006), p.659.
2. Ibid., p. 658.
3. Ibid., p. 660.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 662.
8. Ibid., p. 663.
9. Ibid., p. 663-664.
10. Ibid., p. 665
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 666.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid. pp. 666-667.
16. Ibid., p. 667.
17. Ibid., pp. 669-670.
18. Ibid., p. 671.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 672
21. Ibid., p. 673.
22. King, Jr. Martin Luther, *“I’ve Been to the Mountain Top”* at **University of Baltimore Archives** available at [Speeches of Carl Schurz/03 True Americanism - Wikisource, the free online library](#) accessed June 23, 2024.
23. Schurz, cited above, p. 677.

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