

# WHY AMERICA IS STILL FREE

[Bill Donohue](#)

The most common way to live, across the globe and from the beginning of time, is in a state of authoritarianism. Slavemasters, feudal lords, monarchs, warlords, pharaohs, czars, barbarians—they are the very stuff of history. In other words, historically speaking, to live in a free society is a freak. It's an even bigger freak to maintain a free society; most free societies decompose rather quickly.

In 2026, an estimated 20 percent of the world lives in a free country (historically, that is an exceptionally high number); 80 percent live in non-free countries. Instead of asking why are so few free, the right question should be, “why are any people free?” It makes sense to ask this question given that living in a state of despotism is the most natural way to live.

From ancient times to today, cultures worldwide have found it necessary to build walls. Similarly, were castles built, often atop mountains. In both cases, they were made to protect people from being invaded by hostile forces. In other words, living in peace is an historical anomaly—war has always been the rule, not the exception.

Those who prevail in war become the new leaders, and almost never do they divest themselves of power—they typically grab more of it. It is also true that when the oppressed succeed in overthrowing tyrannical rule, they almost always become the new oppressors.

There are a few instances when those who take power seek to limit it. This was true of Cincinnatus: he exercised dictatorial power to save Rome, but then gave it up a few weeks later. What's even more unusual is for new leaders to adopt a set of principles that allow for the making of a free

society, and then to craft an institutional structure that facilitates this end.

This describes what the Founders yielded.

George Washington could have done what almost all new leaders have done in history—aggregate power to himself, declaring himself king. He did not do so because he believed in republican values, meaning he wanted a society where those who rule do so with the consent of the governed.

Garry Wills, an astute student of American history, noted that Washington gave up power twice: at the end of the revolutionary war when he resigned his military commission and returned to Mount Vernon, and at the end of his second term as president—he refused the opportunity to seek a third term.

We would not be free today without the principles and the tenets of America's three founding documents: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Jefferson, who wrote the Declaration, insisted that our rights were inalienable and that they come from God, our Creator. All men are created equal, he said, and are entitled to equal treatment before the law. Government exists to protect the rights of citizens, receiving its legitimacy by ruling with their consent.

The Founders knew that these foundational principles were not uniformly observed, but they also knew that they gave the American people the legal edifice upon which to secure liberty and equality.

The authors of the Constitution, like most of the Founders, had a good grasp of human nature. Unlike the French, who saw man as being essentially good, the British understood that self-interest is baked into the human condition. As such, the Brits understood the need not to deposit too much power in the hands of any person or group of persons. Hence, the need for

separation of powers.

Those who executed the laws should not be the ones who wrote the laws, and those who sat in judgment about the meaning of laws should be independent of both. Thus, the establishment of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government.

The Founders also knew that to concentrate decision-making at the national level would eviscerate the power of leaders who are closer to the people. That is why they insisted on federalism.

This outcome has served us well. Vertically, powers are divided between those at the federal, state, and local level. Horizontally, they are divided by the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government.

Majority rule is the basis of a democracy, but without protecting the rights of the minority, freedom flounders. That is why the Founders gave us the Bill of Rights, ensuring that the most fundamental human rights—freedom of religion and speech among them—are not up for a vote. Provisions for amendments were made, and in due course the Constitution was amended to abolish slavery.

Has its operations been pretty? No. But has it worked? Yes.

Churchill once said that democracy is “the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” So true. Democracy is sloppy and inefficient, and can be taxing. But the historical alternatives are a disaster.

We are free today because the Founders knew that human nature existed, and that it was unalterable. Taking self-interest into account, they allowed for the three branches of government to be co-equals, while not allowing any one branch to dominate. Madison said it best: “Ambition must be made to

counteract ambition.”

Happy Birthday, America!

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# IN A REAL-WORLD TEST, USA EMERGES #1

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Most Americans are justly proud of their country, but some, primarily those on the Left, are not. They are fond of comparing America’s treatment of various segments of our society to conditions that would exist in an ideal world. Obviously, by this measure, we fail.

That’s their point—they have rigged the game so as to make the U.S. look bad. Why? So they can rush to save us. They are convinced of the superiority of their political agenda, and insist that if they take command, or if their policies are implemented by like-minded radicals, there will be liberty and justice for all.

What a joke. Every country that has ever adopted the politics of the Left has ended in poverty and oppression. A much more realistic way of judging America is to compare us to other countries around the globe, both historically and today.

To that end, the policy staff of the Catholic League chose to examine the status of religious liberty, the status of racial and ethnic minorities, and the status of women that existed in 1776 and that exists today. The result was a short summary comparing conditions in the USA to that of Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Eurasia (Russia), Europe and Asia.

The never-never land approach favored by the Left has its roots in the Enlightenment. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was common to compare current conditions to the ideal. This conclusion is contrived and ordained: of course current conditions are found wanting. Today, left-wing professors use the blackboard to describe their utopian vision of how people should be treated, and then they can do what they delight in doing—showing how we failed.

We didn't fail—they did. They failed their students by comparing America today to some fairy-land of perfection. That is not realistic. What is realistic is to do a cross-cultural analysis of social conditions, past and present.

To read our scorecard on this subject, click [here](#).