

Two Revolutions of 1776

July 4, 2018

There were two world shaping revolutions in 1776. Next Wednesday, July 4, we celebrate the signing of the document that resulted in our American Revolution. The other revolution also rests on a document: *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith's second book, usually known simply as *The Wealth of Nations*. In this book we find the first clear statements of the principles of economic freedom and self-determination that we call capitalism. Both of these revolutions are critically important to the good health that we enjoy today in America and around the world.

The embrace of capitalism and the defeat of serfdom in Europe resulted in the greatest improvement in life expectancy and general health that the world has yet seen. Increases in freedom, self-determination and economic freedom are highly correlated with increased health and reduced mortality. That is true in every known circumstance. A male child born in serf-owning 18th century France had a life expectancy of less than 30 years. A male child born in 18th century England (no serfs) had a life expectancy of 34 years. Life expectancy in England had risen to 41 years by 1820, 50 years by the early 20th century, and today the life expectancy at birth is 81 years in the United Kingdom (UK). It is 82 years in France, and 80 years in the USA. (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2102rank.html>). Of course this term, "life expectancy," encompasses a lot of information, from infant mortality to suicide rates and drug overdose. The biggest improvements in life expectancy are due to changes in infant mortality, and recently we have been losing more young adults to suicide and drug overdose. It has long been true that if a person lived to 40, they were likely to make it to 60 years old. If you want to look further into the changes in remaining life at different ages in the US there is a fascinating interactive graphic at: <http://pages.uoregon.edu/maphist/english/US/US39-01.html>.

While the changes in health from the 18th to the 20th century were due mostly to capitalism, the 20th century showed the global importance of the other revolution of 1776. The most brutal totalitarian regimes the world has ever known, judged by the number of people killed, arose in the early 20th century. The first of these was the communist government in Russia, that spawned other communist regimes. Then the Nazi regime arose in Germany about 20 years later. The deaths resulting from communist governments and the World War started by the Nazis amounted to at least 140 million, and perhaps 180 million people. These dictatorships would not have been ended but for the USA, and the dedication of the men and women of this great country who pledged their lives, fortunes and sacred honor in order that the cause of freedom not perish from the earth. The Declaration of Independence and The Gettysburg Address are two short documents that are well worth re-reading as we remember this country's striving to fulfil the founders' dream of a sovereign and independent nation where people are free and equal.

It is often alleged that capitalism is amoral and is not as compassionate as socialism. In answer to this I first suggest reading Adam Smith's first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which is still one of the world's most influential books on the philosophy of morals. I would also note that the people of the United States give much more money to charity, as a percentage of their income, than those of any other country – almost twice as much. As to compassion, there is a strong correlation between freedom and health, as can be seen by comparing the chart for life expectancy (above) with the Heritage Foundation's Freedom Index (<https://www.heritage.org/index/ranking>). Indeed, of the top 50 countries with the highest life expectancies, only Greece has a recent history of being less than moderately free.

In the upcoming week let us not forget the priceless gift that is our freedom. It has made us healthy and wealthy – we are all among the wealthiest 1% of the world population – but freedom is always only one generation away from oblivion. May we ever remember that, and act accordingly. And may God Bless America.

This column is a service of The Health and Wellness Coalition of Runnels County which now meets every second Thursday at 7 pm. The next meeting will be in the conference room at North Runnels Clinic on July 12. In addition, everyone is invited to join us each Thursday for a healthcare provider led walk, from 6 to 6:30 in the Ballinger City Park. We meet at the Pavilion. (Bring water. Stay hydrated.)