

# INSIGHT

by FATHER JOHN P. BRADLEY, PRESIDENT

Frequently this year the coincidence of the Abbey Centennial with the nation's Bicentennial has been discussed and commented upon here at the College. At times this has prompted me to think about the great changes that have occurred at the Abbey and throughout the nation, some good, some, in my opinion, bad, over the past one hundred years.

Among the changes that are most disturbing are the ever-mounting intrusions by the Federal Government, the constantly increasing regulations with which the college administration has to cope. Private colleges, no less than other forms of private enterprise, are finding that more and more their time has to be devoted to the insatiable purveyors of regulations and less and less to the normal work of providing a college education. This has led me to the following reflections on what I consider to be the unrealistic, utopian thinking underlying the conduct of our national affairs in recent times.

Winston Churchill's remark that democracy is the worst form of political system except all the others is such an effective attention-getter it is easy to miss some wise insights into the human condition that are implied in his remark.

It implies, first, a realistic assessment of human nature, and consequently of all possible organizations composed of human beings. Every human being is fallible, the best minds make mistakes, the most competent of us can be wrong and are wrong often. Furthermore, every human being is an intriguing mixture of good and bad: the poet Robert Burns reminded us that there's so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, it ill becomes any of us to say anything about the rest of us. The novelist Flannery O'Connor observed that evil "is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured."

In other words, human nature is not perfect and so this is not the best of all possible worlds. Consequently, the realist, in contrast to the utopian dreamer, accepts democracy with all its faults and failings as the best possible political system and strives to improve it. As he does so, however, he never forgets that this system is composed of human beings with all their faults and failings, and so the system will be abused by some, and our efforts at improving it will always be accompanied by a good deal of frustration.

A second wise insight implied in Churchill's remark alerts us always to look long and hard at the alternatives to whatever we propose. The long history of the past, as well as the record of contemporary times, certainly furnishes us with sufficient information to assess numerous alternatives to democracy. At the present time the major alternative political system is communism, a totalitarian system in which the government totally regulates the life of its people, with the consequent denial of individual freedom.

Since we human beings are what we are, and this is not the best of all possible worlds, absolute freedom is not possible in any political system, and so a certain amount of regulation of our lives is always needed to protect individual rights and preserve the common good. Democracy is the best system known insofar as it strives to keep the regulation of people's lives to a minimum thus preserving the maximum possible individual freedom. Nowadays the problem for those of us who enjoy the benefits of democracy is to avoid the utopian temptation to extend individual freedom beyond the necessary limits. If these limits are breached, the society begins to lose the delicate balance of rights and duties and the restraints on individual freedom needed to preserve the common good. If this is allowed to occur a form of anarchy takes over. There is growing concern about this in the U.S. today as more and more people begin to live with the fear of being robbed, mugged, or murdered.

In point of fact this is, in my opinion, the very problem the Western democracies are struggling with today, thanks to the very effective efforts of those who reject a realistic understanding of human nature. These people seem to imagine that individual rights and freedom can be extended indefinitely, ignoring the delicate balance between individual freedom and the common good that must be protected if good order in a democracy is to survive. This trend weakens the social fabric of the Western democracies, erodes their

discipline, and makes them ripe for some form of totalitarianism.

A political system cannot, of course, be adequately appraised apart from the economic system undergirding it. Clearly, a truly democratic political system will be undergirded by a free economic system; a totalitarian system will rest on a totally regulated economic system. Here again we can recall Churchill's remark, applying it this time to economic systems, and we can state that a free economic system is the worst, except all the others. Again we must refer back to what has already been said about the importance of beginning our appraisal of any organization composed of human beings from a realistic understanding of human nature. For the same reasons that no political system can be perfect (it will always be marked by the faults and failings of the human beings who comprise it) no economic system can be perfect, always satisfying all. One must expect, therefore, that just as a system of democracy will be

flawed in different ways, so also will a free enterprise system be flawed in various ways. Human beings can be greedy, unscrupulous, neglectful of the rights of their fellowmen, heedless of the common good. The realistic response to this, as it is to the faults and failings of the political system we call democracy, is to strive to curb and penalize those who abuse the free enterprise system rather than destroy the system itself, for experience should have taught us that alternative economic systems spell doom.

Still pursuing Churchill's dictum, we must contrast the free enterprise system with "all the others." Again there is abundant evidence available for making this contrast. With all its present problems America's free enterprise system remains the wonder of the world. It has provided for the great mass of its people a prosperity hitherto unknown throughout history. More importantly, since we are looking at alternatives, let us look at communism. The people in the Soviet Union have to rely on America's agricultural industry to furnish their daily bread and to provide the technology needed to lead them into the modern age. There is indeed a sharp contrast between communism's totalitarian economic system in which the economy is totally regulated and democracy's free enterprise system in which ideally the minimal regulation of the economy is imposed: just enough and no more than is needed to provide realistic protection of the rights of individuals and the common good.

In my view, the most cogent demonstration of the internal dynamism of the free enterprise system is furnished here in America by some reflection on the growing number of restraints and curbs placed on it in recent times. Despite the ever-expanding regulations imposed on our free enterprise system it still remains the wonder of the world. How long the system can continue to overcome this ceaseless growth of government regulation is, of course, another matter. Let's take a look at a few facts cited by Mr. Simon, Secretary of the Treasury, in a recent speech delivered in Charlotte at the Central Piedmont Industries' annual dinner:

"For most of our history, the Federal Budget stayed somewhere below the \$100 billion mark -- usually away below it.

"Then, in 1962, we finally hit \$100 billion -- and that was only the beginning. Seven years later, the budget broke the \$200 billion barrier and then, only four years after that, we hit the \$300 billion mark. And now, in our bicentennial year, we have reached the point where the Federal Government is spending \$1 billion a day.

"The very size of such numbers makes them almost meaningless to the average American. But there are ways of getting the message across. For example: suppose that on the day Christ was born, a man had been given \$1 billion on the condition that he or his heirs spent \$1,000 every day, seven days a week. How long would that \$1 billion last? Adding it up, I think you'll find that today, almost 2000 years later, the grandchildren would still not have spent the full billion dollars. In fact, the money would not run out until 2716, 740 years from now.

"Yet our Federal government is spending \$1 billion every single day, and going into debt another \$1 billion every week.

"And as the budget grows, the government comes to occupy a more and more dominant role within our society.

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## Abbey Library

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fourteen hundreds; five "Incunabulum" which were written prior to the advent of the printing press; thirty or forty books dating back to the seventeenth hundreds; an antiphonal manuscript of handwritten Gregorian chants; the complete works of St. Thomas Aquinas, and a book which was used in a Benedictine monastery in Spain under direct patronage of the King, Phillip 111, in the year 1620.

Mrs. Freeman is cautious in the restoration of the literary works. The books of the eighteen hundreds contain pages which were made from wood pulp. These pages are easily disintegrated. However, books of the 1700's contain pages composed of rag paper, an almost indestructible substance. Some of the older manuscripts contain pages which are made from unborn lamb and calf skin which is almost timeless.

Belmont Abbey College and the library staff consider themselves fortunate because of their library's wealth. It seems as though these literary works transcend us into another 'way-of-life.'

## Bradley

## Delivers

## Two Addresses

Father John P. Bradley recently spoke at two commencement exercises. The first address was given to the 12th graduating class of Gaston Community College, on Sunday, May 30th, and the second to the 6th graduating class of Charlotte Latin School.

Before attending the exercises at Gaston Community College, Father Bradley was present at the commencement luncheon at the Gaston Country Club. The actual graduation ceremony took place at North Gaston High School, where Father Bradley spoke on "Human Values."

The graduation ceremony at Charlotte Latin School took place at 7:00 p.m. on May 31st. Again Bradley spoke on "Human Values."