'Liberty and Freedom': The Eagle Has Landed

By VIRGINIA POSTREL

When patriotic country music fans sing Lee Greenwood's lyric "I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free," what do they mean? Is Greenwood's idea of freedom the same as Bruce Springsteen's or Francis Scott Key's? And is this freedom the same as the liberty of the Declaration of Independence, the Pledge of Allegiance or the statue in New York Harbor? In "Liberty and Freedom," David Hackett Fischer, a historian at Brandeis University, argues that we cannot learn how most Americans understand freedom by studying political theory or intellectual debates. "Most Americans do not think of liberty and freedom as a set of texts, or a sequence of controversies or a system of abstractions," he writes. "They understand these ideas in another way, as inherited values that they have learned early in life and deeply believe."

To probe those unspoken meanings and examine how they've evolved through the nation's history, "Liberty and Freedom" seeks to combine the "new history" with the "old," using the habits and customs of ordinary people to illuminate the actions and ideas of political leaders. The book, Fischer says, is "iconographic. It uses images, artifacts, and material culture as empirical evidence." Before he gets to images, Fischer turns to etymology, establishing a contrast between liberty, whose Latin roots suggest release from bondage, and freedom, which shares Northern European origins with friend. "The original meanings of freedom and liberty," he writes, "were not merely different but opposed. Liberty meant separation. Freedom implied connection." He makes much of this distinction throughout the book, favoring "freedom" and often disparaging "liberty" (associating it, for instance, with Southern racism). Yet he also declares that the creative tension between the two concepts has given English-speaking people "a distinctive dynamism in their thought about liberty and freedom."

The book's more than 400 illustrations include largely forgotten symbols like liberty caps, folk art like the cloth dolls of Frederick Douglass as a slave and a free man, and bizarrely patriotic consumer products like the 1900 toilet adorned with an American eagle. Fischer's narrative, however, concentrates on official iconography, including flags, statues, coins, seals and campaign graphics, and on political leaders and intellectuals. He tells the stories of well-known icons like Uncle Sam, whose evolution he traces from the kindly, avuncular figure of 19th-century cartoons to the stern, demanding face of 20th-
century recruiting posters. "Liberty and Freedom" is not a book about the previously unexplored expressions of unknown individuals.

Still, there's much to learn even from well-known objects. Take the American flag. Compared to the simple iconography of Japan, China or Canada -- or the plain stripes of France, Italy or Russia -- our flag is a gaudy mess. Yet its complexity, like the complexity of the Constitution, reflects an order of checks and balances, of unity and federalism, past and present. It is a graphic representation of e pluribus unum. A historian of early America, Fischer offers rich accounts of the Revolutionary-era creation of national symbols like the flag. In the early Republic, different people put forth all sorts of seals, mottoes and flags, representing both competing ideas of liberty and different graphic heritages. The Stars and Stripes, he notes, emerged as a national banner not out of an official committee but through a decentralized process of experimentation.

In 1777, the Continental Congress finally voted that the national flag should combine the red and white stripes used by Boston's Sons of Liberty with the star-strewn field of blue carried by George Washington's Army. But even that decree left the exact design open. "American citizens received it not as a fixed instruction but as an invitation to creativity," Fischer tells us. "The result was an outpouring of stripes and stars in many designs." Some flag makers arrayed the stars in rows, others in a circle, still others in an ellipse; five-, six- or seven-pointed stars appeared. Some flags included mottoes ("Virtue, Liberty, Independence"), additional images (the Liberty Tree) or the Masonically significant number 76. John Adams added the constellation Lyra to his version. Only in 1912 was the flag's form fixed by law, a symbol, unremarked by Fischer, of that centralizing era.

The most peculiar early American flag, revived after 9/11 as a naval standard, is the rattlesnake banner with "Don't Tread on Me." A poisonous reptile, Fischer notes, was "a strange choice for a sacred emblem." It also represented a symbolic shift, appearing first as a symbol of unity -- powerful when joined, mortally wounded if divided -- and then becoming an emblem of backwoods liberty.

"The rattlesnake is solitary, and associates with her kind only when it is necessary for their preservation," wrote a Pennsylvania Whig in 1775, adding that the snake always gives warning to her enemies and "never begins an attack, nor, once engaged, ever surrenders. She is, therefore, an emblem of magnanimity and true courage." The rattlesnake flag represented the ornery get-out-of-my-face liberty that remains particularly strong among Southerners, black as well as white. This idea of "natural liberty" will be familiar to readers of Fischer's 1989 book, "Albion's Seed," in which he argued that the four waves of British immigration to the American colonies brought with them distinct and geographically enduring folkways, including specific ideas of freedom.

New England Puritans pursued "ordered liberty," or community self-government, which could impose substantial restrictions on individual freedom of action or conscience. Southern cavaliers believed in "hegemonic liberty," a status system in which liberty was a jealously guarded aristocratic privilege that entitled some men to rule the lives of others. By contrast, Delaware Valley Quakers subscribed to "reciprocal liberty," in which every person was recognized as a fellow child of God, entitled to self-
determination and freedom of conscience. Finally, the largest group of immigrants, the borderlanders often called Scotch-Irish, adhered to "natural liberty," a visceral, sometimes violent defense of self and clan. In foreign policy, Fischer's "natural liberty" maps directly to the "Jacksonian America" outlined by the political scientist Walter Russell Mead -- isolationist by preference but relentlessly violent when attacked.

"Liberty and Freedom" expands greatly on that earlier book's discussion, adding other ethnic influences, particularly that of German refugees who sought "a freedom that would allow them to establish their own way of life in security and peace." For German-Americans, the icons of freedom were the fig tree and vine, alluding to the biblical prophecy that "they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid." This dream, Fischer observes, "was an image of a world without violence, very different from the bellicose ways of British borderers but similar in a desire to be left alone by government."

Through the first half of the 20th century, ideas of good government clashed with that ideal, and during World War I and Prohibition (which devastated German-owned breweries and beer halls) German-Americans were among the country's greatest victims. Fischer insightfully characterizes the debate over Prohibition as "a collision between two ideas of liberty and freedom. One of these American visions combined the 'orderly-liberty' of Theodore Roosevelt with the 'publick liberty' of old New England. The other descended from the natural liberty of the backcountry, the reciprocal liberty of the Quaker colonies and the Feigenbaum Freiheit of German immigrants. It created something new from those old materials."

So the folkways of the colonies have divided and fused into two distinct traditions of freedom, one collective, the other individualist. Unfortunately, Fischer doesn't develop the point beyond its application to Prohibition. Given his general sympathy for the collective vision and his frequent disdain for the desire to be left alone by government, he may not want to push the issue. He might feel forced to defend Prohibition or, worse, to acknowledge that the individualist fusion has evolved into American libertarianism, best represented by his bete noire, the economist Milton Friedman. (Fischer's antipathy for Friedman, whom he doesn't name but whose department at the University of Chicago he refers to as "dogmatic" twice in as many sentences, may stem less from Friedman's libertarian popular works than from his influential monetary scholarship, which contradicts Fischer's own eccentric -- to put it mildly -- theories of inflation. )

Fischer is far happier depicting the Schlesingerian "vital center" of his childhood. The book's climax is the Freedom Train of 1947, which toured every state and was visited by 3.5 million people. It carried 126 "universally accepted" documents of freedom, from Magna Carta, Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence, James Madison's draft of the Bill of Rights and Abraham Lincoln's text of the Emancipation Proclamation to the United Nations Charter. The train also displayed physical artifacts, mostly from World War II, including the flag raised at Iwo Jima.

Its goal, one government official said, was "to re-establish the common ground of all Americans" and "to blend our various groups into one American family." Fischer visited the train as a child in Baltimore,
and it made a lasting impression: "The train itself and its streamlined cars were emblems of modernity, and its big locomotive (number 1776) was a symbol of American power. By contrast, the documents seemed old and fragile. They were symbols not of power but of right, and their condition made clear their need to be protected in a dangerous world. Altogether the Freedom Train expressed the material strength and moral resolve of a united people."

Ah, the good old days. The closer the book gets to the present, the less it discusses popular culture or visual symbolism. It loses its early, charming tone and becomes instead a dutiful, sometimes cranky march through the political movements of the late 20th century. Cliffs Notes versions of ideas and individuals appear, but iconography and material culture almost entirely disappear. Fischer doesn't mention the Adam Smith neckties conservative activists adopted in the late 1970's or explain how triangles and rainbows came to symbolize gay liberation. He has room for a mention of Shulamith Firestone's radical, intellectual feminism but none for Marlo Thomas's popular record and television special, "Free to Be You and Me." He provides a dumbed-down version of Friedrich Hayek's classical liberalism but doesn't mention Ayn Rand's blockbuster novels. He devotes pages to Stokely Carmichael but says nothing about Afros, dreadlocks or cornrows. He misses the chance to consider California as a symbol of freedom across the political spectrum. In short, once the apparent uniformity of World War II dissolves, "Liberty and Freedom" loses interest in popular culture. This absence may reflect the author's fatigue as the book moves beyond its 500th page. Or perhaps it is simply harder for Fischer to take a sympathetic interest in the mental and material lives of those contemporaries with whom he disagrees. He seems to resent all these contentious people (except for consensus civil rights heroes) who insist on disturbing established institutions and ideas with their demands for liberty and freedom.

Indeed, he implies that they're downright dangerous. "If a free society is ever destroyed in America, it will be done in the name of one particular vision of liberty and freedom," he concludes. But not, of course, his own.

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