

The United States OR America?

Guest post by Carl Watner. Originally published in The Voluntaryist, July 1986.

On January 10, 1776, Tom Paine published his pamphlet *Common Sense*. It spread like wildfire through the colonies and shattered the King's cause as it set forth the virtues of independence and the absurdity of submitting to the arbitrary rule of a hereditary monarch. Paine opened his essay by examining the origin and design of government. He noted that many writers "have so confounded society with government, as to leave little or no distinction between them; whereas they are not only different, but have different origins." Paine was one of the earliest in a long string of liberty-minded writers to see this distinction. Perhaps the difference between the State (civil government) and society was most succinctly stated by Felix Morely's *The Power in the People*: "The State, in short, subjects people; whereas Society associates them voluntarily."

In *Our Enemy the State*, Albert Jay Nock described the conflict between State power and social power. The State turns every "emergency" into an excuse for accumulating and expanding its own political strength, always at the expense of society. Society originates in what Nock terms, "the economic means," the State in "the political means." There are two ways man is able to satisfy his needs and desires, either in "the production and exchange of wealth," embodied in the free market, or in "the uncompensated appropriation of wealth produced by others," exemplified by the State. Legislative bodies, tax collection agencies, and the armed forces are a few of the many concrete realizations of the State and how it operates.

The spiritual opposites of these State instrumentalities are such institutions as churches, clubs, private schools, businesses, families and charitable or fraternal organizations. They are born out of the mutualism and voluntarism that underlie social power. Unless coerced, individuals associate with other people only when they perceive it to be profitable. This is exactly the means by which the frontiersman and settler populated this continent. Theirs was an unplanned settlement, allowing the individual to partake of as much social intercourse as he wished and then strike out for himself when community life became too overbearing. This *laissez faire* method relied on the natural diversity and self-reliance of the people and was as strong or weak as the people themselves.

The "American dream" is the opportunity to achieve success without interference from others. It is the spirit of individualism, inventiveness and hard work; the spirit epitomized by doing without, rather than asking for a free lunch. It was this dream of success that made this country attract the oppressed peoples of the world. The courageous, daring and resourceful flocked to these shores, often under great hardship, knowing full well that no one else would be responsible for their welfare.

However, as the years passed, more and more Americans accepted the need for outside direction of their lives. They didn't realize that once statism was given a toehold in the form of the Constitution, that it would grow and grow, until today when most people think of America, they automatically think of the United States government. "America, love it or leave it," cry these critics. Yet this is clearly a case of false alternatives and switched identities. It is not the United States of America that we should love or leave. Rightly perceived, America represents society, the social power and spirit which has carved nearly 3,000,000 square miles of territory from the wilderness. America is not even the land itself. This is not the only continent with "spacious skies" or "amber waves of grain." It is not the only land mass with huge deposits of natural resources. Its distinguishing characteristic was that opportunity beckoned here as in no other place.

When we speak of the United States of America we obscure the crucial distinction between the State and its people, between State power and social power, between the spirit and the land. Without the spirit of its people, the land and resources are meaningless. Why haven't other areas of the world developed as quickly or as productively? What was lacking? In those places, State power overwhelmed and smothered social power from the beginning.

Despite the fact that this land has been designated the United States of America for more than 200 years, it is more accurately a question of the United States *OR* America. You, dear reader, are on the jury of over [300 million people] that will decide the case. Will it be the United States or will it be the spirit of America that triumphs?