

The American Enterprise— Property and Slavery

Peculiar Notions of “Freedom” and Profound Contradictions

by Bob Avakian

Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA

In his book *A Slaveholders' Union, Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early American Republic*, George William Van Cleve captures, with biting and incisive irony, a contradiction which in fact gets to the very essence of this country and its posturing as the champion and model of freedom. Here is what Van Cleve writes about the very foundations, and “founding fathers,” of the United States of America:

Consider, for example, the conduct of Richard Henry Lee, the Virginia leader who moved the formal congressional resolution declaring American independence in June 1776. There is no evidence that Virginians thought it ridiculous for Lee to conduct a public parade in Virginia against the Stamp Act’s “chains of slavery” while literally using his slaves to hold his protest banners. ...leaders such as Lee and Patrick Henry, like [American] Revolutionary leaders in other major slave colonies, saw their state’s untrammelled ability to control slavery as a central part of what the Revolution was about.

Think about this: Patrick Henry issues the cry, since made famous, “Give me liberty or give me death!”—while himself owning slaves, and vigorously defending and fighting for the “rights” of slaveowners. Another leading figure in the American revolution, Richard Henry Lee, champions the move for American

independence and freedom, while forcing his slaves to carry his banner denouncing British taxation on people such as himself (the Stamp Act) as “chains of slavery”!

What is captured in these contradictions can stand very well as a metaphor for the nature and role of the United States of America—from its very founding, and down to the present day. This is a country ruled by forces which have always approached “freedom” most essentially in terms of the “right” to accumulate wealth as private property. Under this system, and through its dominant relations and institutions, masses of people have always been regarded and treated as above all instruments to be utilized by a relatively small ruling elite precisely to accumulate wealth as private property: wealth as capital—which means control over, and exploitation of, the labor of others, who are in effect wage slaves—and, for a long period in the history of this country, wealth as human property, literal slaves.

In terms of political philosophy, what has prevailed in this country, from the time of its founding to the present, is a peculiar and a confined and constricting view of “freedom,” corresponding to the outlook and interests of exploiters and oppressors, whose system and whose philosophy have long since become outmoded and a direct barrier and hindrance to the emancipation of the masses of humanity, and ultimately humanity as a whole, from all relations of exploitation and oppression.