



# **A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future**

*Os Guinness*

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2013 Logos Book of the Year in Christianity/Culture "If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide." Abraham Lincoln Nothing is more daring in the American experiment than the founders' belief that the American republic could remain free forever. But how was this to be done, and are Americans doing it today? It is not enough for freedom to be won. It must also be sustained. Cultural observer Os Guinness argues that the American experiment in freedom is at risk. Summoning historical evidence on how democracies evolve, Guinness shows that contemporary views of freedom--most typically, a negative freedom from constraint--are unsustainable because they undermine the conditions necessary for freedom to thrive. He calls us to reconsider the audacity of sustainable freedom and what it would take to restore it. "In the end," Guinness writes, "the ultimate threat to the American republic will be Americans. The problem is not wolves at the door but termites in the floor." The future of the republic depends on whether Americans will rise to the challenge of living up to America's unfulfilled potential for freedom, both for itself and for the world.

## **A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future Details**

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# **From Reader Review A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future for online ebook**

## **Edi says**

Well-researched and thoughtful treatise. Hypothesizing that a nation of laws is but one facet of what the founders had in mind, Guinness puts together observations of the moral mind-set that was present in the diverse gathering of men who first achieved freedom through the revolution, then ordered freedom through the establishment of the constitution and its tri-partite government. The sustainability of freedom is the sticking point, and he brings detailed discussion on how that might (or might not) be achieved in our fast-moving world.

I recommend this to every politician, to everyone who follows politics and to those who won't touch yucky politics with a 10-foot pole. In the last analysis, we are either self-governing together, or we fail in keeping this nation free.

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## **Jessica says**

I won a free copy through First Reads. Please note that all quotes and page references are in regards to the ARC and not the final, published edition.

To be completely honest, I was not able to read every single page of this book. I read it over quite a few months and it was a struggle to get through 5 pages at a time. I think Os Guinness had a good idea when he set out to write this. I appreciated the outsiders view of my country. I did, in fact, agree with a lot of his sentiments regarding how America is losing the true idea behind our freedom. We are a very materialistic society and I agree with the author that we have twisted our freedom into the idea that we are free to buy what we want.

One of the most interesting points he has made, in my opinion, is the fact that not everyone - including the people of the countries that we are claiming to help - agrees that the US is truly providing aid and not simply lording military power over weaker nations:

"Americans must realize, however, that in the eyes of many people around the world, America's interventions in the name of universal democratic freedom are also an assertive form of positive freedom - especially when 'democratic freedom' is used to justify displays of American military power as if the cause of freedom were universally self-evident. After all, no positive freedom is self-evident except to those who believe it. Even 'humanitarian intervention' is not self-evident. It happens to be the term Hitler used to justify invading the Sudetenland and Mussolini used to justify his seizure of Ethiopia. Humanitarian intervention that is just must first be morally justified. It is never self-evident(page 64)."

The reason this passage stood out to me is that I found it interesting to hear the opinion of an outsider who is not in one of the countries receiving humanitarian intervention from the US. However, I am not really sure we can truly consider him an outsider any longer due to the fact that he resides just outside our capital.

Also interesting to me was the inclusion of Roman history. However, the implication at this point is that the United States is going to follow the Roman Empire into complete and utter destruction. While history has

proven to be cyclical many times over, I'm not really sure this is such a great comparison for him to be making.

After covering the establishment of American freedom, Guinness also moved on to cover specific instances of how we are currently failing ourselves. For instance, take this passage from page 163:

"...consider the ironies of the sexual revolution. Those who set out to liberate sex from the cramping constraints of morality and tradition have emptied it of meaning and made it freer, less meaningful, and more chaotic and dangerous at the same time. The newly liberated sex is dangerous not just in the obvious sense of the risks of pregnancy and disease, but in the subtler irony of where unrestrained sex has led America socially. In America, every man is now every woman's potential assailant, and every woman is now every man's potential accuser. Far from *Playboy's* promised return to an Eden of easy Polynesian delights, Americans find themselves in a wilderness of broken hearts, lonely lives and an uneasy state of suspicion between the sexes."

I can wholeheartedly agree that we have taken the idea of personal freedoms too far. We are a very amoral society where people take advantage of others, commit heinous crimes, and just basically take what they want because they feel it is owed to them. It is a recipe for disaster.

To the point of why I disliked this book: Os Guinness is trying to make a statement about the current state of the US and how we are slowly destroying the ideals of freedom established by our forefathers. As I said above, I do agree with him about a lot of what he was trying to put across. However, his writing style is too stiff. There are a lot of unnecessary quotes from people like Alexis de Tocqueville and the Baron de Montesquieu. I realize they were revolutionary political thinkers in their times and were held in high regard but I often found myself wondering what the heck these quotes had to do with the author's point.

Also, a lot of times I felt that the author was pointing the finger solely at the people and not also the government. I think that the current state of affairs is not just the problem of one or the other but both.

The idea is there, the strong level of research is there... the writing style just does not do it justice. I think that readers who are more used to textbook-style political writings would be more into this volume than I was. I would recommend it to more scholarly types who don't mind stiff writing.

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## **Elliot says**

We Americans love to talk about freedom.

We call ourselves "the land of the free"; our Declaration of Independence talks about liberty as an "inalienable right"; there are still few things that can get an American riled up like the threat of a loss of freedom.

But our freedom is in jeopardy, says Os Guinness in his new book, *A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future*. Guinness doesn't find the primary threat to our freedom in an external source, like another nation, or even "big government" or "big business" or special interests. No, the enemy is us. Freedom cannot be won for all time and then left alone; it needs to be sustained. And, Guinness writes, Americans are failing to sustain the freedom our nation's founders worked so hard to win: "The problem is

not wolves at the door but termites in the floor. Powerful free people die only by their own hand, and free people have no one to blame but themselves” (37). The vision of freedom we Americans are pursuing is “short-lived and suicidal” (29).

(Side note: The title *A Free People’s Suicide* might seem bombastic, but it comes from a quote from Abraham Lincoln: “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.”)

The problem with our vision of freedom is that the freedom we love to talk about and claim for ourselves focuses exclusively on freedom from external constraints. There are two kinds of freedom: freedom from constraint (negative freedom) and freedom for cultivating virtue and becoming the people we ought to be (positive freedom). Modern Americans are only interested in negative freedom. We claim rights and entitlements for ourselves, but do not care about duty, virtue, character, or pursuing excellence. Negative freedom alone is unsustainable. Freedom from external restraint, without self-restraint, undermines itself.

What can be done? Guinness argues that we need to return to the founders’ vision of freedom, which he calls the “Golden Triangle of Freedom.” He demonstrates that the founders did not have a vision of freedom that stopped with freedom from constraint. Rather, their vision of freedom was part of an interdependent triangle: freedom requires virtue; virtue requires faith; faith requires freedom.

Perhaps the most controversial part of this triangle of freedom in our time is faith (Eric Metaxas wrote a good review of this book in the *Christian Post* focusing on this point). The point for Guinness, and I agree, is not necessarily that the founders were Christians (though some were). Rather, the point is that the founders (even the Deists) were unanimous in their approval of faith of any kind, because faith fosters virtue, and only a virtuous people can remain free.

Guinness’ book is intended not just for Christians or religious people, but for all Americans who care about freedom. For that reason, I understand his arguing for faith as part of the golden triangle of freedom on pragmatic grounds (he follows the founders in adopting this tactic). Nevertheless, I think his argument ought to have particular force for Christians. The Bible also understands freedom as not merely freedom from constraint.

Six times in the book of Exodus, God says, “Let my people go so that they may serve me.” (Exod 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36), but he also said, “Take my yoke upon you” (Matt 11:29). Freedom, for the Christian, can never be merely about freedom from external constraints. It begins with freedom from constraint, but doesn’t stop there. Christian freedom is not just freedom from, but freedom for: freedom to serve God and others. From a Christian perspective, those who begin by thinking freedom is merely the absence of external constraints end by becoming slaves to their own appetites: greed, lust, and desire for power.

I applaud Guinness’ effort to prod Americans to do the hard work of sustaining freedom. I hope his argument gains a wide hearing. In particular, I hope his argument gains traction among Christians, who are just as prone to only care about negative freedom as anyone else, but who have the least reason for doing so.

Note: Thanks to InterVarsity Press for a review copy.

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## **Shirley Conley says**

4 \*s for its main theme to bring faith back to America the only way to sustain freedom. 2'\* because it is so hard to understand and get through.

Get ready to spend a lot of time with your dictionary or computer. This book is 207 page and took me 33 days to read! You will encounter words, that I would venture to say, will challenge your vocabulary. (i.e. prosaic, hegemonic, virulent, sclerotic, caliphate, lots of ism's', xenophobic, patrimony, solipsism, promethean and on and on.)

Lots of great quotes among my favorites: Lord James Bryce: remarked that he was "startled by the thought of what might befall this huge yet delicate fabric of laws and commerce and social institutions were the foundation (of religion) it has rested on to crumble away." (me too) And Abraham Lincoln "If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be it author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide."

This book, I believe, deserves to be read and perhaps re read. I look forward to reading your comments when you read it.

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## **Brian Watson says**

Honestly, I was hoping this book would be a little better, but, as it is, it's a very important book. Guinness says that Americans are in danger of losing freedom because they don't understand what freedom really is. Freedom is not being able to do whatever you want. Freedom is being able to do what you ought to do. Real freedom is ordered. And the only restraint that doesn't defeat freedom is self-restraint. The Founders realized this. They knew that the Constitution was not enough. No, people need to be moral and virtuous--able to restrain and govern self--in order for the "American experiment" to work.

Guinness says the Founders believed in the Constitution and the "Golden Triangle," which says that freedom requires virtue, which requires faith, which requires freedom. Take away the Golden Triangle and the Constitution will not be enough to sustain freedom. He doesn't make this point, but we can see from recent history that it takes honest politicians and judges to interpret rightly the Constitution.

Guinness does not toe any party line. He blames recent administrations for unwise decisions, for sinking the nation into debt, for imperialistic excursions and so on. The way forward for America is to realize that freedom requires sustaining, which requires a strong sense of virtue, or morality, of obligation to others, not just to self.

I highly recommend this book. I truly think we have no idea what freedom is and we're very much in danger of losing it.

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## **Curby Graham says**

Outstanding work by Guinness as usual. Great way to finish of my reading year. I would recommend this to individuals of all political stripes. The author has some very thoughtful and sobering challenges to both sides of the political aisle.

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## George P. says

At the close of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a woman asked Benjamin Franklin, “Well, Doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy?” To which Franklin replied: “A Republic, if you can keep it.”[1] That question and Franklin’s reply cut to the heart of Os Guinness’s new book, *A Free People’s Suicide*.

According to Guinness, any society that wishes to be free must accomplish three tasks: win its freedom, order is freedom, and sustain its freedom. Americans commemorate the winning of our freedom on July 4, 1776, even though peace with Britain was not formalized until 1783. We commemorate the ordering of our freedom with the adoption (1787) and ratification (1789) of the Constitution. But sustaining our freedom is an unfinished and ongoing task.

Unfortunately, Guinness argues, “freedom has a chronic habit of undermining and destroying itself.” He notes three instances:

“When freedom runs to excess and breeds permissiveness and license.”

“When freedom so longs for its own security that its love of security undermines freedom.”

“When freedom becomes so caught up in its own glory that it justifies anything and everything done in its name, even such things as torture that contradict freedom.”

He then notes that “the last decade has displayed clear examples of each of these corruptions writ large in American culture and in American foreign policy.”

Now, Guinness is a Brit, so it’s easy—too easy—for freedom-loving patriots to dismiss his analysis as so much anti-American twaddle. But Guinness is an America-loving Brit. He doesn’t critique America in order to defame it but to improve it. Indeed, he argues that the sustainability of our freedom depends on our ability to appropriate the wisdom of the Founders for the present day.

A crucial component of that wisdom is what Guinness calls “the Golden Triangle of Freedom”: “Freedom requires virtue, which in turn requires faith of some sort, which in turn requires freedom.” The Constitution cannot secure American freedom in the absence of the character of its citizens. A government for free people requires self-government. But the source of self-government transcends the self and cannot be appropriated by means of coercion. Freedom requires virtue requires faith requires freedom. These qualities are symbiotic and mutually reinforcing.

Like Abraham Lincoln, Guinness doubts that America can be conquered by external foes. In Lincoln’s words, “As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.” Rather, the real threat to the American experiment in ordered liberty is internal. In Guinness’s pithy words, “The problem is not wolves at the door but termites in the floor.” Sustainable freedom begins with renewal at the level of our nation’s moral foundation.

If I have any criticism of this otherwise excellent book, it is that Guinness, like the American Founders before him, is vague about the faith that virtue requires. Freedom requires virtue which requires faith of some sort. Those last three words should remind Christian readers—Guinness himself is an evangelical, and IVP Books is an evangelical publishing house—that Americans have always viewed religion in terms of social

utility and been hesitant in the face of exclusive truth claims or spiritual practices. Christians in America, then, can contribute to the sustenance of their nation's freedom, but must beware lest their Kingdom agenda be sacrificed upon a national altar.

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## **Bob says**

Our country has many problems & there are many books out there ready & willing to explain how it is the fault of (pick the political party or movement you hate), & how the policies & decisions of (pick the politician or public leader you hate) are the cause of our difficulties.

If you want to read a careful, detailed account of why our nation is in the mess it's in, read this book. Oz Guinness does a fantastic job identifying our problems but again this is not another "it's Obama's fault" book.

He explains how unique the United States has been as a nation whose core value has been "freedom." Guinness forces you think beyond the platitudes & common criticisms to the why of what made America great and what can sustain her.

He explains how the Constitution is necessary but not sufficient to ensure freedom. That there is a requirement of an under-girding national character that shares a moral code outside of State control, one that attends to the responsibilities of freedom rather than the license granted by a mere lack of restrictions; that is, duty & restraint is the necessary flipside to infinite choices & self-indulgence. He points out that to define Freedom as the ability "To do whatever I want" will eventually cause America to lose the very freedom which it upholds & holds dear.

Guinness discusses what he calls the 'golden triangle of freedom' the Founders understood. That the cultivation & transmission of the conviction meant that freedom requires virtue, which requires faith, which requires freedom which in turn requires virtue, which requires faith which requires freedom & so on. In other words, freedom depends on the character of the rulers & the ruled alike & upon the trust which exists between them. Guinness writes: Leadership without character, business without ethics & science without human values - in short freedom without virtue - will bring the republic to its knees.

Guinness also argues that "the greatest enemy of freedom is freedom", meaning that the freedom we enjoy turns out to be a sort of assumed freedom that does not press us to persevere in our freedom. For example, in the name of 'freedom' we will go to great lengths to remove our private freedoms in a scary & dangerous world, thus justifying increased government intrusion in a wide variety of surveillance & 'safety' measures, which entails a loss of freedom.

This is a very powerful & sobering read, very well written – I highly recommended it.

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## **Bob says**

Guinness contends that great powers basically destroy themselves from within before they ever fall to external enemies. I write this on the day our government has shut down because our leaders cannot even agree to fund the obligations into which they've entered. Guinness's book seems prophetic and especially



relevant today.

He argues that freedom has been the fundamental and driving idea of the American experiment. But freedom has two aspects, freedom *from* and freedom *for*. His concern is that our understanding of freedom has been pervaded by the former to the neglect of the latter. He argues this was not always so and that we can learn from the framers the positive virtues necessary for sustaining freedom. He believes we can use history to defy history. A repeated refrain in the book is, "For Americans must never forget: all who aspire to be like Rome in their beginnings must avoid being like Rome at their ending. Rome and its republic fell, and so too will the American republic--unless..."

He argues that what is essential is observance of what he calls "The Golden Triangle of Freedom" He argues that freedom requires virtue which requires faith which requires freedom. By this, he means freedom only flourishes in the presence of moral excellence and the cultivation of civic virtue. Virtue in turn must be rooted in some sense of the ultimate--the fear of the Lord, as it were. And faith in turn must be sustained by freedom--free speech, free exercise, freedom of conscience.

He speaks trenchantly about the dangers of overreach which have brought down many of the great powers and it is plain that he sees this as a form of hubris of which we are enamored. He concludes the book with a call not to return to some golden age of American life but nevertheless to return to the American virtues framed by our founders who drew on both biblical and classical sources. He references the beautiful metaphor of the eagle and the sun--the mighty bird whose flight is illumined by something greater and higher.

While this book is published by a religious publisher, Guinness frames his argument in the language of the cultural public square. Whether one is a person of faith or not is beside the point in engaging this book. What is striking to me is that this Irish ex-pat (connected with the Guinness family of brewing fame) seems to love the United States and care deeply for her future. I would encourage others who love this country to consider his argument for sustaining our freedom.

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## **Diane says**

In this book, the author argues that America is founded upon the idea of "sustainable freedom," that is, a freedom where Americans restrain themselves and their immediate desires in pursuit of longer-term goals. He discusses history and how the founding fathers had this view of American life, and how they intended for American citizens to be informed by virtue. Then, he discusses how Americans have lost this vision, and how this explains our contemporary decline, and how it may lead our society to go the way of ancient Rome. Overall, he makes a strong argument for his views, and presents a complicated subject in a manner accessible to the average reader.

However, he leaves many questions unanswered. He talks about how the founding fathers saw religion as necessary to virtue, and virtue as necessary to preserving liberty. However, he never presents a vision for how to promote either faith or virtue in contemporary America, aside from saying it is not the role of the government to do so. While I agree with him, it is not clear what course of action he is recommending.

The author is critical of the utopian strain in American foreign policy, but he never provides an adequate framework for what American foreign policy should be like. He complains about American interventions overseas, but never discusses the fact that much of the world, while criticizing American actions, looks to the

United States for leadership on various global problems. Does the author think that the U.S. should continue to provide leadership on these problems? Should the U.S. seek to empower the U.N. or another international organization to find solutions? Should America just leave other countries to themselves to sort out their own problems? It isn't clear from this book what course the author would recommend instead of the current confusion.

Although the author never says it succinctly, it appears to me that America at the time of the founding had a more robust civil society than currently exists, and this civil society produced habits of the heart within Americans that allowed society to flourish. However, with the growth of the state, civil society has lost much of its influence over contemporary America. Unfortunately, the author never provides any suggestions for how to restore what has been lost. However, he does make an impassioned plea to understand the problem and the consequences of inaction, and for that reason, the book is a worthwhile read.

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### **Barry Ickes says**

Very few authors are capable of saying so much in so few words, Os Guinness is definitely one of them. And very few thinkers are as clear and salient as he in addressing the root cause of the moral decline in our nation. A truly free people requires a virtuous people.

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### **Susie says**

This book challenged me. It challenged me to think about our role in the world, to question our dealings with other nations, and to live in a way that will sustain freedom rather than being a part of its demise. I appreciate the "outsider's" view of America and what we need to do to improve our reputation in the world. As I was reading I truly felt sorrow over many things that we have not only allowed to happen but at times supported the wrong decisions.

This book also encouraged me. It encouraged me to start fresh and to in a sense return to the past so that I can move forward. It also encouraged me to not only think of myself as an individual but as a responsible member of a larger community that provides accountability for each other. Freedom, virtue, and faith are the three pillars that will reinforce each other and ultimately sustain freedom.

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### **Nikolas Larum says**

I must admit that I immediately took umbrage at Guinness's finger waving at America. I usually enjoy Os Guinness and he makes a fair amount of fine points. Perhaps I am guilty of the very American short-sightedness that he accuses us of. But despite his continual pronouncement of admiration for the American model, there is the persistent tone of a European patristically calling the US a bully on the international stage.

Though he doesn't state it in so many words, he implies that for us to be worthy of the liberty we claim by right of citizenship we must deal with all others in the same way. But I fail to see how our enemies captured in war are due the same constitutional protections that they seek to overthrow by might of arms. A difference does exist. He accuses us of overextending ourselves through a cultural imperialism that imposes or

promotes American republicanism, openness, and capitalism on other cultures while at the same time stating that we should carry our liberties to all people's where we go. One can't have this cake and eat it without problems.

I call it a three-star read, but probably because of me and not the author. Os Guinness is better than that.

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### **Jon Sedlak says**

Os Guinness is a superb artist with words. His knowledge of world history, both modern and ancient, is impressive as well. This book contains a lot of unique insights concerning America and its developing history as an empire, all of which illuminate many basic problems which keep it's traces of "true freedom" from being sustained in its present form. He sheds light on problems which have been around since the founding of the nation, some which have evolved since then, and some which are entirely new to the 21st century. All in all, I have read other books which touch upon this subject, and in a limited sense are like this one, but none which have focused entirely upon "freedom" in principle and sustaining that which is true concerning the traditional multi-faceted American views about it. Guinness does not bring in any childish name-calling or rhetorical invectives. As always, his thoughts are well-balanced and considerate of opposing viewpoints.

The weakness of this book, in my mind, is that he presents no absolute, objective standard for virtue, morality, and ethics other than repeating general references to the virtuous Christian religion and Christians within that religion. This is the book's weakest link. For all of his colorful artistic expressions of truth, virtue, and character, this book merely explains how America got to where it is today as an empire of "freedom" and why America needs to sustain "true freedom" (and not just its notion of "true freedom") according to Christian principles. Guinness does not attempt to explain how those principles (specifically) can or should be applied. Every outlined solution is at best general in its description. And so, at best, this book is extremely readable and great for convincing people of America's dire circumstances as an empire promoting true freedom, and is also a fantastic reference for pungent quotes and ideas concerning America's past and future. At worst, it is explicitly standard-less, which irritates my literary tastebuds somewhat. That's why I only gave it three stars.

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### **Joseph Crampton says**

This book, like most everything by Os Guinness, is brilliant! It was so much more than an essay or a few ideas about liberty; it was a clarion call to action. In an age when secular progressives seem to hate the founding generations—they see only “racist, xenophobic slave owners,” rather than visionary and daring political philosophers—it is good to see a call to return to the fountain.

But this book is no reactionary tripe. There is both hope and clarity, as well as vision and a call to action.

Guinness's obvious level of familiarity with the writings from the founding era, foreign observers like Tocqueville and Montesquieu, and contemporary critiques makes him worth considering. But the hopeful call to action was striking. If you are concerned about the direction of America and you want to have a plan for restoring and “sustaining freedom,” do yourself a favor and read this book!

