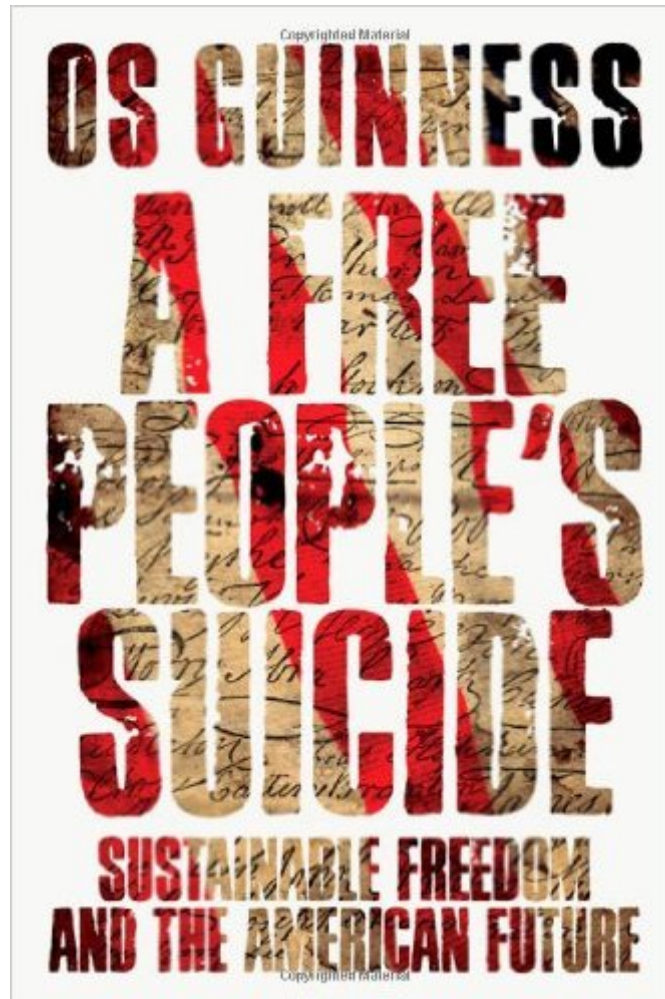


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# A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom And The American Future



## Synopsis

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.

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## Customer Reviews

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." 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.

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 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. 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.

Os Guinness is obviously an intellectual giant, and in "*A Free People's Suicide*," he demonstrates

some clear, provocative thinking on American culture and ordered liberty. That is, the current world view of Americans, if not renewed, will lead to the demise of the American republic. Particularly, his explication of freedom (winning, ordering and sustaining freedom) was compelling and something he obviously has spent a good deal of time researching and formulating. Within this framework, I found him teasing out ideas and ideals not found in other solid books I've read on American liberty (notably M. Stanton Evans's "The Theme is Freedom" and Matthew Spaulding's "We Still Hold These Truths") - and that gives these analyses great explanatory power. Likewise his sections on the compact between Americans and our government, the interconnection of freedom, virtue, and faith and the recommendations on how it can be recaptured. Frankly, had he stopped there and avoided the ad hominem political generalizations in the later sections, I would have given this book 5 stars. So, on the negative side, whenever Guinness wanders outside of his philosophical-theological wheelhouse, namely into politics and statecraft, his product suffers. Meaningfully. He takes the apolitical tack... at times... but then frequently meanders back into generic political commentary and prescriptions. The unspecific terms he employs undermine his arguments here. For example, he cries out again and again about how America cannot sanction torture and remain free (agreed), but then fails to define what he means by torture, trying to make the point based on assumptive agreement by his readers (after all, who could be against any kind of torture?).

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