

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

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A Litmus Test for True Patriotism

“Sometimes a book is so important and so timely that not to have read it is to embarrass oneself. This is such a book. Its message is so crucial and so clear that all Americans are obligated to read it and have a national conversation on its themes. No cultural commentator or politician who has not read this book should ever be taken seriously again. Let this book be the new litmus test. If you are serious about America, be familiar with its themes and expect to discuss them and to be tested on them. Rest assured that you will be, because America is now herself being tested on them. Alas, we will not be graded on a curve. This book’s clarion call is both piercing and full of hope. May God help us to hear it and to take action.”

Eric Metaxas, author of *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*

“With passion and urgency Os Guinness gives a sweeping historical account of America’s past and her prospects for the future. He urges us to pay serious attention to a deeper understanding of freedom and makes a compelling case for why freedom requires virtue. Weaving together a wide-ranging knowledge of classical, constitutional and contemporary history, Guinness warns of America’s decline but charts a course for America’s renewal. It is a straight-shooting and sober volume, yet in the end it is a hopeful book.”

Michael Cromartie, vice president, Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington, D.C.

“*A Free People’s Suicide* is an inside view from the outside. Os Guinness has a clear eye, a quick mind, a profound grasp of political philosophy and an eloquent pen. His analysis of American freedom, what it has been, now is and is likely to become, is a clarion call for renewal of the founders’ vision for a free people.”

James W. Sire, author of *The Universe Next Door*



Os Guinness, D.Phil.,
Oxford writer, lecturer
and social critic

Live free or die?

What moved you to write this book?

Os Guinness: I'm a European, but I'm a great admirer of this country. I think when you come to things that are key for the world, such as freedom, America has what historians used to call the most *nearly* perfect system. But in the last fifty years, particularly since the 1960s, this country is in danger of undermining and throwing away its heritage. If ever America was to practice her first principles and be relevant to the whole world, it's today. But at the very moment she could be more relevant than ever, she isn't, because Americans are squandering their heritage. So I'm partly outraged at the follies I see in this country, and partly extremely sad.

Why is the topic of freedom so important to consider during an election year?

Os: Well here we are in the full cycle of the horse race, and many of the issues being discussed are relatively trivial, compared with the deep underlying issues of the republic. And unless they're put right, America will be in trouble. This issue of sustainable freedom is the very deepest one.

What can we learn from our nation's founders about establishing and sustaining freedom?

Os: The founding fathers had a clear understanding of the tasks they were trying to attempt. The first was to win freedom: the revolution in 1776. But revolutions are not that distinctive. The second task was ordering freedom: that's the Constitution, and that took longer and took a lot more thought. The third part, though, they were equally insistent on, and that was sustaining freedom. Now the fact is they stressed that, because that's the hardest part. But 230-odd years later, hardly any Americans talk of that today. But of course that is today's challenge.

Why is it such a critical time for American citizens to act?

Os: Now that America is dominant in the world, there's only one final stage after dominance, which is decline. So if America doesn't want to decline, you've got to consider what's sustainable. The current American versions of freedom are not sustainable. Unless America discusses how to sustain freedom and renew freedom, she will decline.

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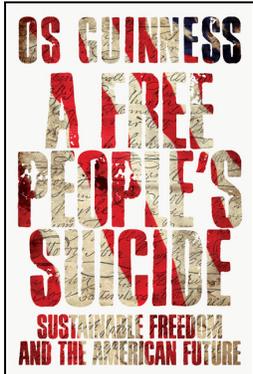
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Q&A

AUTHOR INTERVIEW



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What do you mean by sustainable freedom?

Os: We think of the framers as revolutionary, and they were. But they were also rooted, in the sense that they tried to use history to defy history. If you look at the classics, you have umpteen reasons for why freedom never lasts. So they wanted to create the political equivalent of a perpetual motion machine: a free republic that could stay free forever. If you think of a recycling triangle with the sides that just keep going round and round, the framers' "golden triangle" was this: freedom requires virtue, virtue requires faith of some sort, and faith of any sort requires freedom (and that freedom requires virtue!). This is not a little moralistic saying; it's really hard prudential politics. If this triangle is preserved, then freedom has a chance of surviving.

What are the other kinds of freedom?

Os: The great Jewish philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who was at Oxford when I was a student, talked of the two types of freedom: negative and positive, or "freedom from" and "freedom for." And most modern Americans have only the negative view of freedom. Now, if I'm free from everybody else, I will cut myself off from being responsible for them. Libertarianism taken too far leads to an attitude of freedom that becomes indifference.

If you take the two freedoms, positive and negative, they need each other. In a way, negative freedom is the preliminary first stage; you need to be free from whatever is oppressing you. But then the question is, free for what? "Freedom for" assumes and requires that you know the truth of who you are: if we're animals, we'll live a certain way; if we're humans made in the image of God with an inalienable dignity, we'll live another way. So the reason it's controversial today is that "freedom for" assumes a worldview.

What can individual Americans do to maintain freedom?

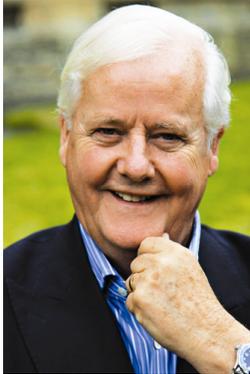
Os: Do what you can, where you are, in the sphere of your calling. The way we approach these huge big-picture problems is to understand what our gifts are, what our resources are, what our spheres of influence are, and to be responsible in those spheres. So I'm a writer, not a politician. A politician is not a computer scientist. A computer scientist is not a homemaker, and so on. We've each got different callings. We've each got to think where the issues touch us and live a different way.


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BIO

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Os Guinness, D.Phil.,
Oxford writer, lecturer
and social critic

Os Guinness is the author or editor of more than twenty-five books, including *The American Hour*, *The Call*, *The Great Experiment*, *Time for Truth* and *The Case for Civility*.

Great-great grandson of Arthur Guinness, the Dublin brewer, he was born in China during World War II where his parents were medical missionaries. A witness to the climax of the Chinese revolution in 1949, he was expelled with many other foreigners in 1951 and returned to Europe. He completed his undergraduate degree at the University of London and his D.Phil. in the social sciences from Oriel College, Oxford.

In the 1960s, Guinness was a leader at L'Abri, an evangelical Christian organization founded by Francis Schaeffer and his wife. In 1984 Guinness came to the United States, where he was a guest scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Studies and then a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution. In 1991 he founded the Trinity Forum and served as senior fellow until 2004.

A frequent speaker and prominent social critic, Guinness is adept at making academic concerns accessible to lay audiences, especially in the field of public policy. As a European visitor to the U.S. and a great admirer but detached observer of American culture today, he stands in the long tradition of outside voices who have contributed so much to America's ongoing discussion about the state of the union. He lives near Washington, D.C., with his wife, Jenny.