

VISION & VALUES CONCISE: The Sound of Freedom

By: Lawrence W. Reed '75

This year, the nation of Austria celebrates the 60th anniversary of its liberation from Nazi occupation. With the Allied victory in May 1945, the German "Anschluss" that had dragooned Austrians into Hitler's socialist Third Reich in 1938 passed into history, remembered only as a testament to the evil that springs from megalomania and unlimited political power.

Austrians are marking a lesser anniversary this year as well, but one that has deep personal significance for me. Forty years ago, one of the most popular movies of all time was released: "The Sound of Music," directed by Robert Wise.

The movie quickly became the box office king of 1965. An American movie aimed primarily at an American audience, it loosely told the story of the von Trapps of Austria and how the family escaped Hitler's grasp. The beauty of the Alpine mountains and the village of Salzburg spurred a pilgrimage of American tourists to Austria that continues to this day. Todd S. Purdum of the New York Times refers to the film as "the last picture show of its kind, a triumph of craftsmanship and the apogee of the studio system that produced the kind of entertainment that dominated mid-20th-century mass culture."

In the summer of 1965, my mother announced one day that she was taking me to a theater in Pittsburgh, 40 miles from our home, to see a film called "The Sound of Music." I knew nothing of it other than that a lot of singing was involved, and to my mind, that was a good enough reason to stay home. I went reluctantly — and was enthralled. The music and the scenery were memorable, but it was the plot and message that changed my life.

I came from a nonpolitical, working-class family. My father quietly voted Republican, and my mother didn't vote at all. When Dad wanted to take my sister and me on a week's winter vacation to Florida in 1963 and our public school principal objected, Dad let him know in exceptionally colorful terms that we were his kids, not the government's, and we were headed south come hell or high water. Perhaps that incident planted a seed of anti-authoritarianism in me that sprouted in a darkened theater two years later.

"The Sound of Music" was a rude awakening. This wasn't a school telling me that I couldn't take a vacation. This was a foreign regime absorbing a peaceful, neighboring country and a father facing orders to abandon his family to serve in the military of that very regime he hated. Something sparked inside me, and it has stayed lit ever since. I wanted to know more about the history of that period, and I began reading everything I could get my hands on, including William L. Shirer's classic "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich." Stories of people yearning for freedom and going to great lengths to secure it captivated me. Socialism,

communism, fascism and all the collectivist "isms" became anathema. They reduced to A pushing B around because A thinks he's got a good idea.

Then came the "Prague Spring" of early 1968. It wasn't Austria, but it was right next door. The news of the stirrings of liberty in communist Czechoslovakia dominated the newspapers and television. I cheered as the Czechs boldly rattled their Soviet cage. When Moscow crushed Czech liberties with troops and tanks, I was outraged and eager to say so. Within days, a blurb in the local newspaper mentioned that an organization called Young Americans for Freedom would be holding a rally in Mellon Square in downtown Pittsburgh to protest the invasion. I bought my first bus ticket. We burned a Soviet flag and carried placards reading, "Liberate Czechoslovakia!"

In those days, YAF provided its new recruits with a wealth of books, magazines and articles — most notably for me, F. A. Hayek's "The Road to Serfdom," Henry Grady Weaver's "The Mainspring of Human Progress," Henry Hazlitt's "Economics in One Lesson," and a subscription to *The Freeman*, the monthly journal of the Foundation for Economic Education. The message was simple: If you want to be an effective anticommunist, you had better know something about philosophy and economics.

Reading all that material taught me some critically important things:

- Ideas rule the world. Tyranny rests on bad ideas; freedom depends on good ones, such as personal responsibility and limited government.
- Freedom is never automatic. You have to work at it, endure setbacks and assaults, and resist the temptation to let somebody else fight freedom's battles for you.
- Government unchecked is freedom's greatest enemy. Expecting too much from government and too little from ourselves is the surest path to tyranny, even though the government's promises of welfare and security may sound attractive.

Those ideas, and many of their corollaries, led me to pursue an economics degree at a place that teaches the values of liberty: Grove City College, in Pennsylvania. From there, I went on to be a teacher myself, first at Northwood University and then as president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. Liberty has been a common theme of my political thought through all those years.

If my mother had not insisted on making the trek to Pittsburgh to see "The Sound of Music," maybe I would have become a promoter of freedom by some other route. But in hindsight, I have my doubts. It seems more likely that I'd be a photographer or a veterinarian today. Those are respectable and fulfilling professions to be sure, but they're not what I chose.

So I owe much of my last 40 years to a couple of hours in front of the big screen. Some say "The Sound of Music" was corny, but for me it was an epiphany. It's my favorite film, and it always will be.

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