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# Immigration Control, Circa AD 175

BY HAROLD B. JONES, JR.

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Last January the *Wall Street Journal* reported on the aftermath of federal agents' success in rounding up Hispanics on charges of immigration violation. The Georgia company where these "illegals" had been employed sought to obtain replacements by paying higher wages and offering free transportation. It was soon involved in a series of legal challenges that a company representative traced to the sentiments of people who were not really interested in working. Turnover skyrocketed and productivity fell off. Seeking to justify the native-born employees' poor attitudes and performance, a professor at a nearby university said the work was something to which no American would ever aspire. She neglected to add that it was something to which the Hispanics did aspire and to which they gave their best, making them exactly the right people for the job. She neglected also to point out how regulations were standing in the way of personal freedom and economic efficiency.

The story is an old one. There has been more than one time in history when the effort to restrict immigration has hindered the progress both of those who were trying to improve themselves and of the civilization that was trying to keep them out. It is worth the time it takes to review a lesson from the late second century and the story of an emperor whose policies were not as wise as his philosophy.

Marcus Aurelius was born in AD 121, at the high point of what Adam Smith's friend Edward Gibbon

said was the historical period during which humanity enjoyed the greatest prosperity and happiness it had ever known. Aurelius was 15 when the Greek orator Aelius Aristides announced that it was time for the whole world to lay down its arms as if at a festival; the only tasks with which the cities of the Empire needed to concern themselves were those associated with the construction of public buildings—fountains, gymnasia, temples, arches, schools, and workshops.



Marcus Aurelius

It was in many respects a time like our own. The general population was more interested in athletic contests than in business or the affairs of state. Epictetus offers a vivid account of the Romans' love for gladiatorial contests and chariot races, the partisans of the whites, reds, blues, and greens debating endlessly the merits of their respective teams. "Freedom" had come to mean order, stability, regularity, and the maintenance of ancient social distinctions. Plutarch said the Romans had as much liberty as the government allowed

them and it was just as well that they were not given more. Like motivational speakers in modern America, "philosophers" (who were said to have been as common as cobblers) toured the Empire offering easy answers to difficult questions. Two of the young Aurelius's teachers, in fact, had become wealthy on the lecture circuit.

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The education of Roman children was for long centuries entrusted to private enterprise, but late in the first century Vespasian brought the more important schools of rhetoric under imperial control by turning professors into government employees, complete with a pension after 20 years' service. Early in the second century, the financing of secondary education became a municipal responsibility. Aurelius records his gratitude for the fact that rather than sending him to a government school, his father had decided to have him home-schooled.

Actually, this was his maternal grandfather, Antoninus Pius, who had adopted three-month-old Marcus when the boy's father died. The Emperor Hadrian, who was a frequent visitor in the home, took a liking to the child, and when Antoninus Pius was selected to succeed Hadrian, it was with the specific provision that Marcus Aurelius would succeed Antoninus Pius. The tasks of government were mastered in a series of political appointments, the offices assigned carrying increasing authority as youth gave way to manhood and manhood became maturity. When Aurelius became emperor in AD 161 he was almost as well prepared for the job as anyone could have been.

But only "almost": the new emperor had gained no experience with military action, the necessity for which confronted him as soon as he assumed the throne. A half century of peace had encouraged Rome's leaders to neglect what Adam Smith said was a government's primary obligation, that of protecting its society from military violence on the part of other societies. An attack from Parthia (modern-day Iran) caught the Romans off guard. The assets of the imperial household were auctioned off to raise funds, an army was formed, and Aurelius's adoptive brother Lucius Verus took command of it.

### Looking for Trade

Along the Empire's northern borders, meanwhile, German tribes were on the move. The record of

negotiations with them suggests that they were less interested in conquest than in opportunities for trade and land on which to settle. There had been a time in history when they might have been welcomed, a time, Gibbon said, when Rome had been open to the contributions of every slave, stranger, or barbarian who was willing to play a part in making her great. By the self-indulgent second century that time had passed, and the tribesmen were treated as a threat to imperial security. Aurelius assembled another army and commanded it in a series of campaigns along the Danube. Between battles he entered his thoughts in a diary, which was found among his things after he died and published as *Meditations*.

### Libertarian Author

The ideas contained in this small volume seem to mark its author as a libertarian. At one point, he comes close to suggesting that the tribesmen have as much right to occupy the land as the Romans do to keep them off it. The spider that captured a fly, he said, the man who trapped a boar, and the soldier who killed a "Sarmatian" (the generic term for the peoples who lived along the Danube) might all be regarded as predatory thieves.

The philosophy of the *Meditations* is part of an intellectual tradition going back to the third century BC, to the city of Tarsus, and to a man named Zeno. Aristotle's opinion that people were from the hour of their birth marked out either for subjection or for rule found no echo in the teaching of Zeno. He believed that society should not be divided into classes, for all could become wise. Men and women might have different roles and different capacities, but they were equal as free moral agents. The ideal state would embrace the whole world, and its laws would be dictated by nature rather than convention.

Called "Stoics" because of the porch (*stoa*) on which their teacher gave lessons in Athens, Zeno's followers believed that everything from the falling of a leaf to the rise of an empire could be explained in terms of a sin-

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The ideas contained in Aurelius's *Meditations* mark its author as a libertarian.

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gle underlying principle, or *logos*. In *The Economy in Mind*, Warren Brookes grasps the essence of this concept when he talks about how the natural ecosystem maintains its own balance. All of its elements, he says, are so closely interrelated that even the best-intentioned efforts at regulation bring about reactions and distortions throughout the system. The accommodations by which the ecosystem moves toward equilibrium are part of nature's tendency to preserve, protect, and strengthen itself. Such adjustments may entail some discomfort, but the results they lead to are better than anything that could be produced by means of intervention from the outside.

The Stoics said the universe, as animated and directed by the *logos*, tends toward harmony, and the wise person seeks to live with this in mind. This meant, first of all, tending to one's own business. Aurelius said that each person should focus on his private concerns because these were his particular thread of the universal web. Such a focus might draw criticism from external observers, but it was the only way to happiness and peace of mind. Your critics have reasons of their own, Aurelius told himself, but you cannot afford to concern yourself with those. Do not look around for praise or encouragement. Just keep your eyes fixed on your purposes.

### Not Narrow Self-Interest

Using a term that was popular during the eighteenth century, Adam Smith called this "self interest." In Aurelius's mind it referred not to a narrow selfishness but to the simple truth that his own concerns are the only things about which a person can know enough to be effective. And this, remember, was the opinion of an emperor, a man whose authority reached so far that even the Chinese knew about him. His concerns included much that was not strictly private. He could oversee the management of imperial affairs and direct the operations of an army, but he refused to pry into other people's motives, and he

wished they would resist the temptation to pry into his.

Focus on the issues of your own life, Aurelius said, because that is how you can make the maximum possible contribution to the good of the universe. To each individual thing Nature has assigned enough time and energy, and in the case of human beings enough intelligence, for a limited number of tasks. The wise person therefore concentrates his attention on what is actually in his power. The fig tree does a fig tree's work, a dog does a dog's work, and a bee does the work of a bee. The sun has one job, the wind another, storm clouds a third, and all play a part in the final result. Just so, each human being has his own particular tasks, and no one knows more about how to do them than the person to whom they have been assigned.

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This being true, it is not merely foolish but barbarous, to deny a person the privilege of pursuing what he believes to be his proper concerns. A man is always justified in seeking what he imagines to be his own good. We are all working together for the same end, Aurelius insisted, some of us knowingly and others unconsciously. Even the malcontent who is trying to stand in the way will be found in the end to have played an important part. The best of all possible governments would therefore be concerned primarily with upholding

the liberty of the subject.

Detailed regulation on the part of the state was counterproductive because of the unseen rationality already built into the nature of things. Early in the fifth book of *Meditations* Aurelius said, "Look at the plants, sparrows, ants, spiders, bees, all busy with their own tasks, each doing his part towards a coherent world order." Adam Smith went into some length with a paraphrase of these lines and the surrounding passages in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which was published 17 years before *The Wealth of Nations*. It seems probable that the notion of an "invisible hand" was something he discovered in the writings of Marcus Aurelius.

This idea was destined to work a revolution first in

the intellectual and then in the economic life of the eighteenth century. It had little impact on the life of the second. It is true that Aurelius initiated a systematic effort to reduce the extent of slavery, not quite a campaign for general emancipation, but a policy of granting freedom whenever it was possible to do so. Again and again the surviving documents report that a slave had attained his freedom in accordance with the emperor's command. This policy may bear witness to an understanding of the relationship between economic efficiency and the Stoic insistence on personal liberty. Aurelius writes of having spent a long time with Cato's *Agriculture*, which argues that cultivation could be accomplished more effectively by free men than by slaves.

### Debasing the Currency

To the extent that liberation was carried on in defiance of popular beliefs, it was the exception rather than the rule. In other respects, Aurelius's policies paid homage to expectations. Returning to Rome after a military campaign, he granted the citizens' demand for eight gold coins per person. The old practice of paying the peasants to have children reached its widest expansion. Imperial extravagance was funded by debasing the currency. The philosophic emperor's greatest downfall, though, came in the way he dealt with his problems on the northern borders.

Repeating the sentiments of Zeno, he had described all the world's inhabitants as fellow citizens of a single city. A consistent application of this insight might have been the salvation of Rome. The soldiers coming back from the war with Parthia carried with them a plague, which infected every area to which they were later assigned. In Rome itself, the death rate rose to over a thousand a day, and corpses were carried out of the city in heaps. Whole cities reverted to jungle or desert. For this depopulation the tribes of the north were a ready

solution, the very friends and allies of which Mediterranean civilization was desperately in need. Treated instead as enemies, they responded in kind, and years were wasted in expensive wars.

These wars, in turn, were a major cause of the military chaos that overtook Rome during the third century. Aurelius's son Commodus made a hasty treaty with the tribes along the Danube but retained the prerogatives his father had assumed for the sake of military operations. Unresolved tensions along the northern frontier and the hostility of Parthia led Commodus's successors to expand the army. With additional legions came additional expenditures, and the competition for scarce resources produced new centers of power.

Roman generals began to direct their forces against each other rather than the "barbarians," and a once tightly-knit polity unraveled. The Empire of which Diocletian assumed control in AD 285 was a mere shadow of what it had been a hundred years before.

The situation facing the United States at the dawn of the 21st century is similar to the one Rome faced in the evening of the second. There are on the one hand implacable enemies, who seem to be bent on the destruction of Western civilization. There are on the other

hand potential friends, who would like very much to share in and contribute to the abundance they see just across the border. Modern America is like ancient Rome in that it seems to be incapable of distinguishing between its enemies and its friends.

Some may reply that the members of this latter group must be treated with hostility because crossing the border is a violation of our laws. Those who say this should consider the words of Aurelius's forebear in Stoicism, Cicero, as reported by Will Durant late in eighteenth chapter of *Caesar and Christ*: "True law is right reason in agreement with nature, world-wide in scope, unchanging, everlasting. . . . We may not




**The situation facing the United States at the dawn of the 21st century is similar to the one Rome faced in the evening of the second.**

Credit: Denis Fuentes

oppose or alter that law, we cannot abolish it, we cannot be freed of its obligations by any legislature, and we need not look outside ourselves for an expounder of it.”

### Natural Order

There is a law that no legislation can rightfully attempt to override. What Adam Smith described

as every person’s uninterrupted effort to improve his own condition is one expression of that law. It is as much a part of the natural order as the forces that bring springtime and fall. Left to operate freely, such forces tend toward harmony, progress, and improvement. Hindered or bottled up, they may become destructive. Today’s leaders might do well to consider the unfortunate example of Marcus Aurelius. 

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