



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on December 18, 2017

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The Power and Purpose of Western Civilization

Far away and cold beyond cold. The words do not do the reality justice in describing the state of the *Voyager 1* spacecraft hurtling outward into the galaxy. The furthest man-made object from our warm, watery world, its now antique instrumentation peers back to its origin, and in the lens of its camera, that origin is merely a speck. Forward, into the great void beyond the planets, the little probe hurtles, an infinity awaiting it.



Voyager 1 is mankind's first interstellar spacecraft, something that, when stated in such terms, seems a matter only of science fiction, rather than science fact. Yet, the truth remains: In 1977, the United States, the wealthiest and most technologically advanced nation in history, built and launched the very first interstellar spacecraft. In fact, it launched a pair of them. Like *Voyager 1*, *Voyager 2* is exiting the solar system. In 300,000 years, it will pass the great star Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky.

For the *Voyagers*, eternity is the future, and for that eternity they will represent the greatest achievement, to this point in any case, of a great civilization of epochal importance. The *Voyagers* were created by technological means derived from the epistemological practice of science, a means of interrogating the material world and increasing our understanding of it. But science itself is predicated on a whole host of other civilizational characteristics, all of which coalesced in what was once known as "Christendom" and has, more recently, come to be known as Western Civilization.

Today, that civilization is under increasing pressure. It is derided, even hated, in some quarters. The derision is unjustified, and even dangerous, for Western Civilization has almost single-handedly made the modern world; given us our technology; elevated mankind from intellectual darkness and slavery of body, mind, and soul; and provided a platform for a future of limitless hopes and possibilities.

Unique to Creation

Unique in its achievements as compared to other mere human-scale activity, the greatness of Western Civilization is only truly appreciated when its inconceivable rarity is understood. That rarity has to be set against the entire background of creation. Not only within the vast extent of our own solar system, but of the entire cosmos, there is no other sign of life, let alone any evidence of some other, alien, civilization.

This is despite the fervent desires of many, who, perhaps fearful of a terrifying existential loneliness, hope for the discovery of some shred of life anywhere. Modern hope for this discovery reaches back to the mid-20th century and famed astronomer Frank Drake. While working at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory in Green Bank, West Virginia, in 1961, Drake first presented what has come to be known as the "Drake Equation," which has been used ever since to estimate the likely number of advanced civilizations in the galaxy.

The Drake Equation takes into account a number of factors, including how often stars suitable for life are formed, the fraction of those stars that actually have planets, the number of planets per such solar



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system that might have life-sustaining environments, the fraction of those on which life actually appears, a further fraction on which civilizations exist with the ability to develop technology that can be detected from space, and the length of time over which those civilizations release signs of their existence into space.

The most famous solution for the Drake Equation has long been that offered by astronomer Carl Sagan. “When we do the arithmetic,” an optimistic Sagan wrote, “the number that my colleagues and I come up with is around a million technical civilizations in our Galaxy alone. That is a breathtakingly large number, and it is exhilarating to imagine the diversity, lifestyles and commerce of those million worlds.”

The fly in the ointment of this optimistic conclusion is something known as the Fermi Paradox. About a decade before Drake came up with his equation, commonly accepted lore has it, famed physicist Enrico Fermi realized that a sufficiently advanced civilization would be able to colonize the galaxy, and would thus be detectable. As explained by the SETI Institute:

Fermi realized that any civilization with a modest amount of rocket technology and an immodest amount of imperial incentive could rapidly colonize the entire Galaxy. Within ten million years, every star system could be brought under the wing of empire. Ten million years may sound long, but in fact it’s quite short compared with the age of the Galaxy, which is roughly ten thousand million years. Colonization of the Milky Way should be a quick exercise.

So what Fermi immediately realized was that the aliens have had more than enough time to pepper the Galaxy with their presence. But looking around, he didn’t see any clear indication that they’re out and about. This prompted Fermi to ask what was (to him) an obvious question: “where is everybody?”

Now, Fermi never really formulated his eponymous paradox quite that thoroughly. As Robert H. Gray pointed out for *Scientific American*, it’s much more accurate to attribute the thinking behind the Fermi Paradox to astronomer Michael Hart and physicist Frank Tipler. Still, despite finding significant numbers of exoplanets orbiting stars outside our own solar system, we seem to be confirming not Sagan’s optimism, but the pessimism of the Fermi Paradox realization that there is no other civilization out there. Moreover, there might not even be other, simpler forms of life.

Our own remarkable little planet might be the only redoubt of life anywhere in the universe. On that point, Peter D. Ward, professor of geological sciences at the University of Washington and his colleague, University of Washington, Astronomy Professor David Brownlee, penned the book *Rare Earth* in 2000, pointing out the many startlingly rare factors that had to coalesce in order to make our small planet capable of hosting complex forms of life. They concluded that “it appears that Earth indeed may be extraordinarily rare.”

Just how rare, exactly, is difficult to know. We can’t see everything in the galaxy, much less the universe. But what we can see hasn’t provided any reason to lean toward Sagan-like optimism in a profusion of alien life. Just the opposite, in fact. It seems that the conditions required for life, and especially for intelligent life of the human sort, are astronomically rare. Commenting on this conclusion for the *Washington Post* in 2016, Harvard University astrophysicist Howard A. Smith noted:

The bottom line for extraterrestrial intelligence is that it is probably rarer than previously imagined, a conclusion called the misanthropic principle. For all intents and purposes, we could be alone in our cosmic neighborhood, and if we expand the volume of our search we will have to wait even longer to



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find out. Life might be common in the very distant universe — or it might not be — and we are unlikely to know. We are probably rare — and it seems likely we will be alone for eons. This is the second piece of new evidence that we are not ordinary.

Smith concludes with the exhortation that we “acknowledge the compelling evidence to date that humanity and our home planet, Earth, are rare and cosmically precious.”

“And may we act accordingly,” he advises. Indeed, as far as our current scientific capabilities inform us, there is nothing like human intelligence anywhere else in the universe. The greatest outcome of that intelligence has been Western Civilization.

From Family to Civilization

Alone on our planet among the cosmic wilderness, the individual human can never live alone, and is never fully self-reliant. From birth, the child, alone, faces a near certainty of a quick death. An infant has no physical defense against the myriad terrors it faces. The helpless child has no ability to eat or drink on its own, cannot provide for itself shelter from the heat or the cold, from the rain, wind, or snow.

Family, the mother and father, provide for the needs of the child. Yet for the most robust health, growth, and success, this core family benefits from the extended help and care offered by grandparents, aunts, and uncles. More, cousins add to the increasingly rich and varied life and experience of the family. And each of these has outward connections, friendships, and ultimately marriages with others beyond the core family, creating a community. In this community grows a commonality of thought, practice, and belief, a rising of modes of living, codes of conduct, and a sharing of knowledge. Tastes and preferences are formed. Writ large, a village arises, then a town, a city, a nation. And over this aggregate a culture. As this culture carries itself forward, from one generation to the next, it becomes something more: a civilization. Finally, said the great historians Will and Ariel Durant, “It is the civilization that makes the people: circumstances geographical, economic, and political create a culture, and the culture creates a human type.”

But culture can change as circumstances change. Historically, war and conquest have laid waste, ruining civilizations. Famines and diseases have erased whole cities and cultures. Sometimes, the end remains a mystery. We see today the remains of civilizations and know not what led to their downfall. What happened to the Indus Valley civilization? What happened to the Anasazi? Or, perhaps most intriguing of all given its incredible antiquity, what transpired with the Old Copper Complex people, who flourished in northern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan nearly 8,000 years ago, mining and working copper long millennia before the pyramids of Egypt were conceived?

Heretofore, civilization has been an ephemeral thing, waxing and waning, but Western Civilization is different. Though numerous authors and respected authorities have repeatedly predicted its demise, it continues to grow in scope and influence. In his tremendous work *From Dawn to Decadence*, the great historian Jacques Barzun argued that “in the West the culture of the last 500 years is ending,” in a conclusion that followed Oswald Spengler. In his *Decline of the West*, Spengler argued that culture lived, then transitioned to civilization, which was then moribund and ultimately dead. “Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable,” Spengler wrote. “They are a conclusion, the thing-become succeeding the thing-becoming, death following life,



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rigidity following expansion.”

This was true for civilizations of the past, but it is not now true of the Western. The civilization that we now inherit has at its core certain facets that make it different than all others. They are the same facets that enabled the development of the advanced science and technology of the *Voyagers* and beyond, and they are the same facets that make Western Civilization more robust and enduring.

Roots of Resilience

Unlike the ossified civilizations of Spengler’s description, what we today call Western Civilization has unique characteristics. Where other civilizations had changeable, human-centered foundations that, once they failed to function, led to downfall and discord, the core of Western Civilization is based on the Decalogue (i.e., the Ten Commandments). Whether one is religious in the Judeo-Christian faith tradition or not, these remain both legal and moral truisms and the essential means of ordering and limiting authority in society.

Consider the first four commandments. These not only provide a framework for the proper orientation of mankind to God, but also set the framework for the proper power relationship within human society. “Thou shalt not have strange gods before me,” God proclaims in the First Commandment, and this is normally taken as a prohibition against worshipping the pantheon of innumerable pagan gods and goddesses that haunted the mind of the ancient world. Yet, it is similarly a prohibition against worshipping the false gods that mankind would raise, most notably and commonly the false god of government as represented in the era of the Roman Empire by whichever Caesar had donned the purple.

So we find that the early Christian martyrs would not worship Caesar, even on pain of torture and death. The earliest account of such a martyrdom to reach us is that of Saint Polycarp, martyred, most agree, in 155 A.D. In the letter from the church in Smyrna where Polycarp was bishop that recounts his death, we learn that the Roman authorities met him after his arrest “and taking him up into the chariot, they seated themselves beside him, and endeavoured to persuade him, saying, ‘What harm is there in saying, Lord Caesar, and in sacrificing, with the other ceremonies observed on such occasions, and so make sure of safety?’” Refusing, Polycarp was led to the stadium, where a crowd had assembled to watch his death. Again, the Roman authorities demanded he renounce Christ in favor of Caesar. To this Polycarp refused, replying: “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?” After this, he was to be bound and burned alive, but when he was not consumed by the flames, he was stabbed to death. This, his reward for adhering to Christ and the First Commandment against the false god of government.

In Saint Polycarp’s martyrdom, we see devotion to Christ and Scripture, and an indictment of government as a totalitarian institution. Within the heart of Western Civilization is the legal truism that totalitarian government is illegitimate, a recognition that is carried down to the very foundation of the American Republic. When Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal ... with certain unalienable rights,” he was acknowledging that no government could usurp the role of God and abridge those rights. This is the First Commandment in action.

Similarly, the other commandments order the good relation of person to person in a complex society. Thou shalt not kill is a protection of the inviolable personal right to live. Thou shalt not steal is a



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protection for private property. Though shalt not bear false witness is the moral foundation of contract. That such truisms have a solid universality is evident in that, so many millennia after they were delivered to Moses, they continue to be so obviously relevant and practical.

Extended, emphasized, and refined by Christ through His salvific mission and His establishment of the Christian church that carried the Word of God to the European world, and then worldwide, the Judeo-Christian ethical and theological tradition protected and nurtured the revolutionary ideal of individual value, and of the possibility and desirability of individual rights and actions.

Emerging and arising from this was the modern economic foundation of Western civilization. If individuals could have a legitimate ability to maintain their own lives even against the state and to keep the product of their labor, in the sense of owning property, to the point that it could be stolen from them by neither taxmen nor highwaymen, then could arise an impetus for creative initiative and voluntary exchange. "The experience of the past leaves little doubt that every economic system must sooner or later rely upon some form of the profit motive to stir individuals and groups to productivity," noted Will and Ariel Durant in their little text on *The Lessons of History*. "Substitutes like slavery, police supervision, or ideological enthusiasm prove too unproductive, too expensive, or too transient."

This played no small part in the rising prosperity of the 12th and 13th centuries in Europe that saw the end of what is often incorrectly referred to as a Dark Age. Importantly, as historian David Hackett Fisher points out in *The Great Wave*, his 1996 study of economic and monetary history from the 12th century to the present, 800 years ago Europe experienced an age of diffuse political power and rising industry and commercial exchange.

Politically, Fisher notes, "The twelfth century in Europe was marked by the simultaneous development of monarchy, aristocracy and popular government in open and pluralistic systems that were unique to the Western world. Power was broadly distributed among kings, clergy, nobles and commons." A greater dispersion of power necessarily makes it likewise more diffuse and less of a threat to individual liberties.

Not surprisingly, then, during an era of more diffuse power, coupled with a decrease in war and violence, peaceful trade and commerce expanded, as did the population. "Families, cities, markets, guilds, and fairs multiplied everywhere in Europe," Fisher points out. "Centers of commerce and industry grew at a great rate.... The economy of medieval Europe rapidly developed from a comparatively primitive system of barter exchange toward a more complex system of market relationships."

The great symbols of what was then an opulence and wealth that hadn't been experienced since the height of Rome's power some thousand years earlier were the magnificent cathedrals erected during the age. These include Chartres, Reims, Strasbourg, Sienna, and Lincoln Cathedral in England, among many other examples.

The 12th-century Renaissance, the commercial practices it fostered, and the renewed impetus it gave to science through the intellectual efforts added to the immense labor and artistry that brought the great cathedrals into being laid the groundwork for the even greater Renaissance to come in 14th- and 15th-century Italy.

This came about under the most improbable circumstances. In the early 14th century, the great plague swept through Europe, killing by some estimates a third of the population. On the back of this catastrophe, the economy faltered and political instability grew. Amazingly, even against this backdrop,



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the growth of Western Civilization continued and flowered brilliantly in the fiercely independent city-states of the Italian peninsula.

Chief among these were the city-states of Venice and Florence. Here commerce and trade expanded, experiments with republican forms of government flourished, and the first brilliant stirrings of science, art, literature, and historical inquiry set Western Civilization on an arrow-straight course to our modern world. From this period we have such luminaries as Michelangelo, Leonardo, Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Raphael, to name but a few in art. In literature and historical inquiry, we find Francesco Petrarch bursting onto the scene, following Dante, and accompanied by Machiavelli and Giovanni Boccaccio, again to name but a few. Significantly, in terms of future developments of considerable importance, Fisher points out, during the early decades of the 15th century, leading thinkers “such as Leonardo Bruni, Coluccio Salutati and Poggio Bracciolini produced a literature which celebrated republican virtue, the rule of law, and the power of reason.” Connected to this, in science, we have a growing understanding of matters in optics, symmetry, and perspective that informed the magnificent art of the period; developments in pigments used in painting that presaged, along with the striving of the alchemists, the coming of the science of chemistry; and, in the overlap of art with science, the unequalled genius of Leonardo and the engineering brilliance of Brunelleschi, whose great dome over Florence’s Santa Maria del Fiore astonishes now as it did then as the largest brick dome ever constructed.

It is in commerce that we find the most direct evidence that individual freedom and property rights spur creativity and prosperity. In his study of the age entitled *Renaissance Florence*, historian Gene A. Brucker observed:

The tempo and direction of the business activity of the Florentine mercantile community was constantly changing, according to inclination, opportunity, and circumstance. A merchant might temporarily abandon his moneychanging table in the Mercato Vecchio to invest his capital in foreign trade. Or he might decide to withdraw from the manufacture of woolen cloth to concentrate on the more profitable production of silk.... Rarely were the economic interests of Florentine merchants ... fixed irrevocably. The business world was in constant flux.

All of these developments — commercial, scientific, cultural, and many more — were direct outgrowths of the essential core of Western Civilization that recognized the value of the individual and encouraged individual creative activity in concert and partnership with others. In no other civilization had this been explicitly acknowledged, protected, and revered.

Vitality and Flexibility

Again and again, crisis follows periods of expansion and growth. But Western Civilization, by virtue of its theological and moral insistence on the innate value of the individual as a creation of the Divine, has, through that insistence, an ability to learn, adapt, and absorb. As a result, unlike Spengler’s other civilizations that were stultified endpoints, Western Civilization endures and grows.

Following immediately on the heels of the Renaissance, European civilization embarked on the age of exploration, when the Atlantic nations superseded those that had thrived along the coast of the Mediterranean. A steady stream of bold mariners followed the path of Columbus into the trackless, watery wastes.



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Broadly, there were two results of the new age of exploration, if viewed from the wide-angle perspective of civilization. First, the smaller, less sophisticated civilizations of the new world were largely unable to cope with the challenges presented by the incandescent vitality of Western Civilization. While they withered over the succeeding centuries, Western Civilization prospered.

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Of late, this has been viewed darkly by the modern inheritors of the West. Columbus is widely scorned now, and the age of exploration he led is viewed in some quarters as a genocidal crime.

In some details, these charges ring true. Native populations and cultures were decimated, and the Atlantic slave trade, a terrible crime against generations, flourished. But, simultaneously, Western Civilization learned from the experience. Importantly, Western Civilization, with its religious and moral foundation, became the first civilization in human history to eliminate slavery.

Meanwhile, the commerce that initially quickened life in 12th- and 13th-century Europe, and that built the fame and fortune of the Italian city-states in the Renaissance, grew to new heights with the rise of trans-oceanic navigation and trade. So too did that trade further push the demand for new technologies in shipbuilding, navigation, construction, engineering, medicine, and all areas of science and technology. The effects of the explorations of the mariners that followed Columbus “were felt in every phase of European life,” wrote Will and Ariel Durant in their *Story of Civilization*. “The voyages of 1420-1560 nearly quadrupled the known surface of the globe. New fauna and flora, gems and minerals, foods and drugs, enlarged the botany, zoology, geology, menu, and pharmacopoeia of Europe.” The direct outcome was to set in motion the modern world. “Modern science and philosophy rose, and undertook the epochal task of reconceiving the world,” the Durants concluded.

The key is that Western Civilization continued to advance as it spread outward. Even more remarkable is that this occurred while at home, in the Europe of the 17th century, disaster piled on disaster. The era of the Little Ice Age brought crop failures, disease, and famine on a scale not seen since the ravages of the Black Death. Entire communities were buried by ice and snow. But even the winter chill inspired, and Pieter Bruegel the Elder added his name to the list of great master artists, not least through his famous winter landscapes, such as *The Hunters in the Snow*.

As if nature’s predations were not enough, war ravaged the continent for a century. “During the entire century from 1551 to 1650, peace prevailed throughout the continent only in a single year (1610) — a record unmatched since the 14th century,” wrote David Hackett Fisher.

The core tenets of Western Civilization, though, were by this time surrounded by the more sophisticated tools of what was rapidly becoming the modern mind. The tree of civilization was now tall and strong, and like a great oak, it withstood those ravages, its spreading crown encompassing all other civilizations, even as it shaded them and sometimes crowded them out.

Adaptability and the Future

Looking back from the vantage point of the newly minted 21st century, Western Civilization is remarkable not only for what it achieved, but for what it survived.

By the time it emerged from the medieval period, there was no reason to conclude that the then-Christian civilization of Europe would survive, much less prosper. The competing and neighboring Islamic civilization was vital, wealthy, strong, and expansionist. It could lay claim to the world’s leading



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teachers, philosophers, explorers, and mathematicians. Its commercial and military exploits were reaching throughout the known world. Yet, here Western Civilization demonstrated one of its key attributes, the ability to absorb characteristics from other civilizations. In its encounter with Islam, Western Civilization rediscovered many of the works of classical antiquity, became acquainted with a broader swath of the world, and learned new mathematics, science, and technology.

Much the same happened later, when Western Civilization confronted the ancient and vital civilizations of India and the Far East. The West grappled with these, grew strong from them, and even exported much of its thought to them. The impact is felt down to the present. The great and ancient kingdom of China has been increasingly in the grasp of significant Western ideas for more than two centuries now, with the last century in particular being significant, first, for the imposition of communism there, and, more recently, for the dilution of communist tyranny and the growth of individualism. Both are exports from Western Civilization.

From an external viewpoint, Western Civilization is now ascendant and unchallenged. The only civilization that remains to challenge the West is Islam, and despite fearfulness in the West, Islam's resurgent vitality is overmatched by the West's global dominance. Already the tide of Islamic resurgence in the Middle East seems gradually to be falling back from its recent confrontation with the rocky shores of the West. The signs of the West's individualism are everywhere evident in the bosom of Islam, of most note in the region's blossoming commercial ties with the West. Islam will not fade away, but in coming centuries the conflicts of our age between the two remaining civilizations will fade into history as the West adapts again, and Islam accommodates the overwhelming abundance of life that Western Civilization provides.

The only true challenge to Western Civilization is now found internally. Alarming, internal dissent from the traditions of the civilization are growing in strength and influence. This is most especially true of the growing post-Christian population that hungers to see the Judeo-Christian heart of the civilization torn from its breast.

These enemies of civilization have been wrongly led to conclude that this central pillar is illiberal, dogmatic, tyrannical, and prejudiced beyond reform. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. The essential strength of the Judeo-Christian core is that it boldly proclaims the dignity of the individual as inviolable against the tyranny of government.

That dignity is essential to the future. Astronomer Carl Sagan, a perennial favorite of those who would now count themselves critics, if not enemies, of Western Civilization, was part of the Voyager Program for NASA, those interstellar probes that mark one of the singular achievements of Western Civilization.

As *Voyager 1* was heading to the edge of the solar system and interstellar space, it was Sagan who convinced NASA to turn the probe's camera lens back toward Earth and record the image that became known as the "pale blue dot." That image was indeed of a dot, four billion miles distant, suspended inconspicuously in a sunbeam.

"That's us," Sagan wrote of that dot. "On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals,



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every corrupt politician, every ‘superstar,’ every ‘supreme leader,’ every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there — on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.”

And that’s it. In the vastness of the cosmos, there is likely no other place like it, and certainly no other intelligence like humankind, and no other civilization struggling to understand the universe it confronts.

“And he said: Let us make man in our image and likeness: and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth. And God created man in his own image: in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them.”

So says the Creation account of Genesis, and so it appears to our science. Alone among the stars, the individual human consciousness is unique, exactly as described in the Judeo-Christian tradition. And the greatest achievement of the divinely created human mind is Western Civilization, which demands that the dignity of the individual be respected and protected, and which fosters personal growth and improvement.

Without this foundation of Western Civilization, we are lost. “Civilization is not inherited,” Will and Ariel Durant taught in their *Lessons of History*; “it has to be learned and earned by each generation anew; if the transmission should be interrupted for one century, civilization would die, and we should be savages again.”

And the reverse is likewise true. If Western Civilization is robustly embraced, its teachings respected and extended, the dignity of the human individual fully protected and respected, the idolatry of the state finally extinguished, there is no limit to what may be achieved. And there is no reason to think the achievements of the future will be elusive.

Western Civilization has produced an unprecedented standard of living, delivered technologies that border on magical, and enabled us to reach beyond our own solar neighborhood. Only a few centuries ago, what we now take for granted, if it had been described to the population at large, would have been declared something that could only spring from the outbursts of a lunatic.

“The heritage that we can now more fully transmit is richer than ever before,” proclaimed the Durants. “It is richer than that of Pericles, for it includes all the Greek flowering that followed him; richer than Leonardo’s, for it includes him and the Italian Renaissance; richer than Voltaire’s, for it embraces all the French Enlightenment and its ecumenical dissemination.” Thus, the great historians concluded, we may advance further than ever before “because we are born to a richer heritage, born on a higher level of that pedestal which the accumulation of knowledge and art raises as the ground and support of our being. The heritage rises, and man rises in proportion as he receives it.”

We are the inheritors of the greatest of civilizations, the pinnacle of knowledge and achievement. We are unique among the whole of creation.

And the future that we make, if we build upon, rather than tear apart, the amazing civilization we’ve inherited, will be a marvel even beyond the wildest musings of our imagination.



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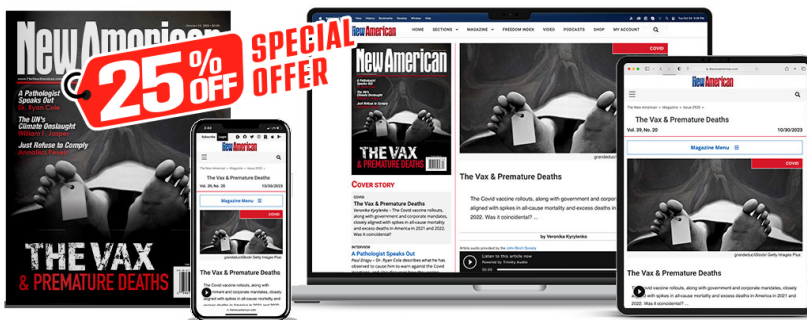
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