No Firecrackers Allowed

By JAMES BURNHAM

The passing of yesterday's noisy, patriotic Fourth of July celebration is symbolic of the erosion of individual liberties today.

Last Fourth of July was a good day for meditation in our locality. The hot holiday quiet was unbroken by snap of firecracker, boom of daybomb, or whish of rocket. The torpedoes and cap pistols were silent. In the evening there were no pinwheels, Roman candles, or even hand-waved sparklers to contend with the late-settling summer darkness.

This was the first year of our state's total prohibition of the manufacture, sale, purchase, possession or use of fireworks by individual citizens. We are in style, though a little late. There are now forty-two states in which fireworks are totally prohibited or sharply restricted. Only six outlaws are left—Nevada, Oklahoma, Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, and of course Texas. No doubt these mavericks will soon be brought into line by the forces of Progress.

I estimate ("guess," I'd better say, since I've had no help from the Gallup, Roper or any other Scientific Poll) that in these forty-two states, under these prophylactic regulations, two or three score children did not die from careless handling of six-inch cannon crackers; a dozen did not lose the sight of one eye by looking to see why a fuse wasn't burning after the match had been applied; thirty fires were not started; and eight babies escaped stomach-aches from eating firecrackers under the impression that they were Tootsie Rolls.

I am not quite so sure about the net casualities for the day. I put at seven million minimum the number of children who, finding nothing to do around the firecrackerless house and neighborhood, insisted on drives in the holiday traffic; and of these, x were killed and y injured in the normal percentage of automobile accidents. Still, I won't deny that the decrease in burns and fires was a good thing. When the State restricts liberty, everyone knows that it is always for our own good.

Our town—which dates back into colonial times and was a hotbed of the Revolution—also omitted the Fourth of July parade and the speeches at the War Monument this year. With the fireworks silent, the spirit seemed to have gone out of the rest of the ceremonies. (The month before, in compensation, the League of Women Voters did arrange a very tasteful celebration of United Nations Day.)

So it was restful here on the Fourth. A time for reflection. It was much more restful than the Fourths of my childhood, just before and during the first World War. We used to wear ourselves out with all sorts of foolish, wasteful, reactionary behavior, enough to bring a blush to the cheeks of any progressive school teacher, if there had been one around. The Fourth, in fact, ranked just next to Christmas in the holiday roster. The first early morning firecrackers and cap pistol shots were like the early presents in the Christmas stockings, opened before breakfast.

Flag-Waving Americanism

Later in the morning came the parade, a big parade with everyone in the village taking part. It was trouble to prepare, that parade: carriages and cars elaborately decorated with flags and bunting; bicycles covered with red, white and blue; the smaller children dressed as Uncle Sam, Minute Men, drum-and-fife boys. The parade ended in the traditional manner, with the singing of *The Star Spangled Banner*, the reading of the Declaration of Independence by one of the teachers, and a speech by the village's leading politician. It was never a very elegant speech by New Deal standards: full of flag-waving phrases, talk about the Father of His Country and patriot blood—100 per cent Americanism, in short, the kind of barbarian prejudice that is going to stop forever when the UN Declaration of Rights gets adopted.

When the speech was over, all the children rushed home to their caches of fireworks, and the afternoon was spent in noise and pickup ball games. My father was a railroad man. He used to bring home a batch of spiked railroad "fusees." In the evening we would surround the yard with them, and they would burn for half an hour with their special kind of red and green glowing light. We would then go down to the Lake Michigan shore half a mile away, to set off rockets. As the day's final act we would send into the night sky, far across the lake until they twinkled out of sight, a flock of those wonderful great paper balloons that were inflated with hot air from the paraffin-impregnated wood shavings that burned at the bottom of their delicate frames.

For the children the speech was a bore, and even the parade got pretty tiresome. They waited impatiently through the ceremonies for the fireworks to come. But somehow the whole day fitted together. Didn't *The Star Spangled Banner* itself mention "the rockets' red glare, bombs bursting in air"? It had taken a lot of bangs to fix history's seal on the Declaration of Independence. Even the danger, what there was, from the fireworks seemed appropriate. After all, the talk was about liberty, and has there not always been some risk, some danger in getting—or keeping—liberty?

We are apt to think of the loss of liberty as the sudden consequence of catastrophe: war, invasion, revolution, the march of primitive hordes or of disciplined gangsters in red or brown shirts. So it often is. But liberty can also be eroded away, small grain by grain, a structural undermining that is hardly noticed before the final fall becomes determined.

How many of us know, or in the least concern ourselves if we do know, that until the first World War—so brief a while ago in the vast calendar of history—no passport or papers of any kind were required for travel over nine tenths of the earth? Well understood, how precious a right is the right to go where I want to go. Liberty means to be able to choose. The existence of passports, visas and similar documents means that I cannot choose freely when and where to travel. But perhaps what is most disturbing is not that we must have a passport but that we are not indignant that this should be so.

From our pay checks—*before* we receive them—there is deducted a regular, and not inconsiderable, sum for "social security." I as an individual do not authorize this deduction nor can I prevent it. This sum is extracted from me through a process backed not by the puny pistol of a lone and private robber but by the full coercive power of the State, by all its armies, police and jails. It is all for my own good, I am told, for the protection of myself, my wife and my children against the hazards of injury, old age and death. Naturally, this is what I am told: this is the song that always accompanies the rape of a liberty. And what if I do not wish to provide in this manner for my own and my family's protection? What if I think that I can do better with my money in other ways, or don't give a damn about security, or even consider the whole State program of social security a fraud and a delusion? That will make no difference. I will have to pay anyway. I have no choice: that is, no liberty.

The Internal Revenue Bureau—and You

The leviathan State of our time is fed by money, rivers and oceans of money. Nothing sets the State into such furious activity as its ravenous appetite for money. How many of us realize that an organ of our State—the Internal Revenue Bureau—can at any moment (on the merely alleged ground, for example, that he has underpaid his income tax and is planning to skip the country) impound and block all of a man's assets? That is, the Bureau can prevent him from making any use of his bank accounts, credit, securities or whatever, and thus can as a consequence quickly destroy his livelihood and his future. No matter how fantastic the Bureau's charges, it will be up to the accused individual to prove them wrong—by procedures that are painful, lengthy and frustrating; the Bureau is under no obligation to prove itself justified. In tax matters, a man is guilty until he proves, irrefutably, his innocence. More: through the Declaration of Estimated (and not yet received) Income, he must "confess," and confess concerning a future about which he may have no rational grounds for any prediction whatever. If his confession is more than a fraction inaccurate, though made with all the sincerity of a true penitent, he will pay the penalty as for a crime.

The draft board does not ask my sons whether they wish to register for military service, nor will it consult them, a few years from now, about calling them up. During the period of their liability

for service, moreover, their occupation, residence and travel will be ultimately subject to the draft board's control and veto. This may be necessary for the nation's defense, but however necessary, it is a long detour from liberty. And it is noticeable that in recent years there does not seem to be much effort to convince young men to volunteer, or to explain the national goals and interests that might inspire patriotic citizens to enlist of their own free will. The mechanical State prefers to solve its problems by impersonal coercion.

May I hire whom I choose? By no means. My potential employee must belong to this or that