



BY EDWARD H. CRANE

## President's Message

# Ayn Rand Was Right

October 10 marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of Ayn Rand's best-selling novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. It is an epic story that has changed the lives of millions around the globe, including mine. Today, *Atlas* still sells about 150,000 copies a year in the United States. Rand once wrote a book entitled *The Virtue of Selfishness*, which critics on both the left and the right cite to demonstrate how hopelessly rigid and inappropriate was her philosophy.

But they misunderstand what she was talking about. "Selfishness" in Rand's lexicon simply meant being true to your own values. The challenge, in her view, was to adopt rational values—ones that I believe include a concern for those who need help through circumstances that are no fault of their own. The main virtue of selfishness, however, comes from a clear-eyed pursuit of your own purpose in life, your own productive drive for achievement. That is why Rand so loved America. The concept of our inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was the political expression of her philosophy.

As I have written many times before, the essence of America is a respect for the dignity of the individual. Ayn Rand knew that, and *Atlas Shrugged* powerfully demonstrated that. Unfortunately, the genius of this great nation is under attack, from liberals and so-called neoconservatives. Cato distinguished fellow and Nobel laureate James Buchanan presciently wrote nearly six years ago, in criticizing the emphasis by limited-government conservatives on economic growth rather than liberty, "If the liberal ideal is not there, there will be a vacuum and other ideas will supplant it."

And, indeed, they have. The leading Democratic candidate for president, Hillary Clinton, in a recent interview on MSNBC, said, "You know, when I ask people, 'What do you think the goals of America are today?' people don't have any idea. We don't know what we're trying to achieve. And I think that in a life or in a country you've got to have some goals." It is, of course, fine for individuals to have goals in life, but the world is much worse off because of nations presuming to have goals. The American Founders would have considered the idea of a national "goal" absurd, which it is.

Neoconservatives are determined not to be outdone by the left in setting grand national goals.

David Brooks, a columnist for the *New York Times*, wrote some years ago in the neoconservative *Weekly Standard* that we need to pursue "national greatness," which he describes this way: "Individual ambition and willpower are channeled into the cause of national greatness. And by making the nation great, individuals are able to join their narrow concerns to a larger national project." More recently, in October, he wrote in the *New York Times*, the neoconservatives do not "see a nation composed of individuals who should be given maximum liberty to make choices. Instead, the individual is part of a social organism and thrives only within the attachments to family, community and nation that precede choice." He calls for "a political age built around authority rather than freedom." Scary stuff.

The philosophy espoused by Clinton and Brooks has been tried and found wanting in the 20th century. It is interesting that while capitalism has clearly won the war against socialism, the battle between liberty and power remains. George H. W. Bush spoke contemptuously of the "vision thing." But the vision of the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is what America is all about. Our friend David Kelley, founder of the Atlas Society, quotes Atlas hero Hank Rearden, defending himself in court: "I work for nothing but my own profit—which I make by selling a product they need to men who are willing and able to buy it. I do not produce it for their benefit at the expense of mine, and they do not buy it for my benefit at the expense of theirs; I do not sacrifice my interests to them nor do they sacrifice theirs to me; we deal as equals by mutual consent to mutual advantage."

President George W. Bush has complained about the idea of "a politics of nothing more than leave me alone." He should be heartened by the fact that Hillary and the neocons have no intention of doing so. But "leave me alone" is what motivated tens of millions of people to come to America. We should reject the politics of "national greatness" and "national goals" and embrace the American recognition of the greatness of individual liberty. Ayn Rand was right.

“It is interesting that while capitalism has clearly won the war against socialism, the battle between liberty and power remains.”