

**164.** Richard M. Nixon, "What Freedom Means to Us" (1959)

*Source: Vital Speeches of the Day (September 1, 1959), pp. 677-79.*

In 1958, during a "thaw" in the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to exchange national exhibitions in order to allow citizens of each "superpower" to become acquainted with life in the other. The American National Exhibition opened in Moscow in 1959. It was a showcase of consumer goods and leisure equipment, complete with stereo sets, a movie theater, home appliances, and twenty-two different cars. But the exhibit's message was the equating of freedom and consumerism.

Vice President Richard Nixon opened the exhibition with an address that emphasized the "extraordinarily high standard of living" in the United States, with its 56 million cars and 50 million television sets. The Moscow exhibition became the site of a classic Cold War confrontation over the meaning of freedom—the "kitchen debate" between Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Twice during the first day, Nixon and the Soviet leader engaged in unscripted debate about the merits of capitalism and communism. Overall, Nixon's speech and the ensuing debate reflected the triumph during the 1950s of a conception of freedom centered on economic abundance and consumer choice within the context of traditional family life.

I AM HONORED on behalf of President Eisenhower to open this American Exhibition in Moscow. Mrs. Nixon and I were among the many thousands of Americans who were privileged to visit the splendid Soviet Exhibition in New York, and we want to take this opportunity to congratulate the people of the U.S.S.R. for the great achievements and progress so magnificently portrayed by your Exhibition.

We, in turn, hope that many thousands of Soviet citizens will take advantage of this opportunity to learn about life in the United States by visiting our Exhibition.

Of course, we both realize that no exhibition can portray a complete picture of all aspects of life in great nations like the U.S.S.R. and the United States.

Among the questions which some might raise with regard to our Exhibition are these: To what extent does this Exhibition accurately present life in the United States as it really is? Can only the wealthy people afford the things exhibited here? What about the inequality, the injustice, the other weaknesses which are supposed to be inevitable in a Capitalist society?

As Mr. Khrushchev often says: "You can't leave a word out of a song." Consequently, in the limited time I have, I would like to try to answer some of these questions so that you may get an accurate picture of what America is really like.

Let me start with some of the things in this Exhibit. You will see a house, a car, a television set—each the newest and most modern of its type we can produce. But can only the rich in the United States afford such things? If this were the case we would have to include in our definition of rich the millions of America's wage earners.

Let us take, for example, our 16 million factory workers. The average weekly wage of a factory worker in America is \$90.54. With this income he can buy and afford to own a house, a television set, and a car in the price range of those you will see in this Exhibit. What is more, the great majority of American wage earners have done exactly that.

Putting it another way, there are 44 million families in the United States. Twenty-five million of these families live in houses or apartments that have as much or more floor space than the one you see in this Exhibit. Thirty-one million families own their own homes and the land on which they are built. America's 44 million families own a total of 56 million cars, 50 million television sets and 143 million radio sets. And they buy an average of 9 dresses and suits and 14 pairs of shoes per family per year.

Why do I cite these figures? Not because they indicate that the American people have more automobiles, TV sets, or houses than the people of the U.S.S.R.

In fairness we must recognize that our country industrialized sooner than the Soviet Union. And Americans are happy to note that Mr. Khrushchev has set a goal for the Soviet economy of catching up in the production of consumer goods.

We welcome this kind of competition because when we engage in it, no one loses—everyone wins as the living standards of people throughout the world are raised to higher levels. It also should be pointed out that while we may be ahead of you as far as these items are concerned, you are ahead of us in other fields—for example, in the size of the rockets you have developed for the exploration of outer space.

But what these statistics do dramatically demonstrate is this: That the United States, the world's largest capitalist country, has from the standpoint of distribution of wealth come closest to the ideal of prosperity for all in a classless society.

As our revered Abraham Lincoln said "... We do not propose any war upon capital; we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else."

The 67 million American wage earners are not the downtrodden masses depicted by the critics of capitalism in the latter part of the Nineteenth and early part of the Twentieth Centuries. They hold their heads high as they proudly enjoy the highest standard of living of any people in the world's history.

The caricature of capitalism as a predatory, monopolist dominated society, is as hopelessly out of date, as far as the United States is concerned, as a wooden plow.

This does not mean that we have solved all of our problems. Many of you have heard about the problem of unemployment in the United States. What is not so well known is that the average period that these unemployed were out of work even during our recent recession was less than three months. And during that period the unemployed had an average income from unemployment insurance funds of \$131.49 per month. The day has passed in the United States when the unemployed were left to shift for themselves.

The same can be said for the aged, the sick, and others who are unable to earn enough to provide an adequate standard of living. An expanded program of Social Security combined with other government and private programs provides aid and assistance for those who are unable to care for themselves. For example, the average retired couple on Social Security in the United States receives an income of \$116 per month apart from the additional amounts they receive from private pensions and savings accounts.

What about the strikes which take place in our economy, the latest example of which is the steel strike which is going on? The answer is that here we have a firsthand example of how a free economy works. The workers right to join with other workers in a union and to bargain collectively with management is recognized and protected by law. No man or woman in the United States can be forced to work for wages he considers to be inadequate or under conditions he believes are unsatisfactory.

Another problem which causes us concern is that of racial discrimination in our country. We are making great progress in solving this problem but we shall never be satisfied until we make the American ideal of equality of opportunity a reality for every citizen regardless of his race, creed or color.

We have other problems in our society but we are confident that for us our system of government provides the best means for solving

them. But the primary reason we believe this is not because we have an economy which builds more than 1 million houses, produces 6 million cars and 6 million television sets per year.

Material progress is important but the very heart of the American ideal is that "man does not live by bread alone." To us, progress without freedom to use a common expression is like "potatoes without fat."

Let me give you some examples of what freedom means to us.

President Eisenhower is one of the most popular men ever to hold that high office in our country. Yet never an hour or a day goes by in which criticism of him and his policies cannot be read in our newspapers, heard on our radio and television, or in the Halls of Congress.

And he would not have it any other way. The fact that our people can and do say anything they want about a government official, the fact that in our elections, as this voting machine in our exhibit illustrates, every voter has a free choice between those who hold public office and those who oppose them makes ours a true peoples' government.

We trust the people. We constantly submit big decisions to the people. Our history convinces us that over the years the people have been right much more often than they have been wrong.

As an indication of the extent of this freedom and of our faith in our own system, forty hours of radio broadcasts from the Soviet Union can be heard without jamming in the United States each day, and over a million and a half copies of Soviet publications are purchased in our country each year.

Let us turn now to freedom of religion. Under our Constitution no church or religion can be supported by the State. An American can either worship in the church of his choice or choose to go to no church at all if he wishes. Acting with this complete freedom of choice, 103 million of our citizens are members of 308 American churches.

We also cherish the freedom to travel, both within our country and outside the United States. Within our country we live and travel where we please without travel permits, internal passports or police registration. We also travel freely abroad. For example, 11 million Americans will travel to other countries during this year, including

10,000 to the Soviet Union. We look forward to the day when millions of Soviet citizens will travel to ours and other countries in this way.

Time will not permit me to tell you of all of the features of American life, but in summary I think these conclusions can objectively be stated.

The great majority of Americans like our system of government. Much as we like it, however, we would not impose it on anyone else. We believe that people everywhere should have a right to choose the form of government they want.

## Questions

1. Why do you think Nixon begins his speech by discussing the American standard of living rather than other manifestations of freedom?
2. What other elements of freedom does Nixon refer to in the speech?

## 169. Allen Ginsberg, "Howl" (1955)

Source: Allen Ginsberg: "What sphinx of cement . . . / . . . American river!" (Moloch section, 34 l.) from "Howl," from *Collected Poems 1947-1980* by Allen Ginsberg. Copyright © 1955 by Allen Ginsberg. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

A different kind of criticism of mainstream culture arose from a group of artists and writers of the 1950s known as the Beats, centered in New York City and San Francisco, as well as college towns like Madison, Wisconsin, and Ann Arbor, Michigan. Rejecting the work ethic, the consumer culture of the suburban middle class, and the militarization of American life by the Cold War, the Beats celebrated impulsive action, immediate pleasure (often enhanced by drugs), and sexual experimentation.

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked," wrote the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg in "Howl" (1955), a protest against materialism and conformism. Ginsberg wrote of American life through the image of Moloch, an idol in the Bible to whom parents sacrificed their children. In the poem, Moloch was a symbol of a militaristic, materialistic society that stifled spontaneity and human feeling. "Howl" became a kind of manifesto of the Beat Generation.

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What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and  
ate up their brains and imagination?

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars!

Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies!

Old men weeping in the parks!

Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental

Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soul-

less jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings

are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned

governments!

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb! Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities!

Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind!

Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body! Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky!

Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasures! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible mad houses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!

They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!

Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river!