

## Brave New Singapore (Part 1)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*

January 4, 2006

*This column is the first segment of a two-part series commenting on the lack of liberty in Singapore.*

Amid its pristine spires, economic prosperity,<sup>1</sup> efficient subway and infrastructure, and the almost perfect cleanliness and crime-free environment of Singapore lurks an eerie fiend: slavish oppression. After serving as a British colonial outpost in Southeast Asia from 1819, the small<sup>2</sup> “Parliamentary Republic” of Singapore attained peaceful independence from Britain in 1958 and set up its own government linked with Malaysia. The tropical city-state attained complete independence in 1965, and has since grown to a population of 4.24 million. The nation has virtually no agricultural production and relies completely on tourism, banking, manufacturing, and trade (imports) for survival. It has blossomed into an offshore tax haven in recent years and many multinational firms have their Asian headquarters in Singapore. Singapore is ranked second in the world (behind Hong Kong) in the Cato Institute’s *Economic Freedom of the World* 2005 index.<sup>3</sup> During our December 2005 visit, my wife and I experienced favorable first impressions to say the least.

With the world’s second busiest port,<sup>4</sup> first world shopping malls, and top-notch public services, one might be tempted to think that Singapore is a bastion of capitalism and freedom. However, upon closer scrutiny, one can see that Singapore more closely resembles Hitler’s Germany overflowing with its Brown Shirt regiment. Let’s not forget that Germany emerged from the Great Depression earlier under Hitler’s rule and began to enjoy economic prosperity under him. Some have labeled Singapore’s socio-economic system as “neomercantilist”; others as simply “fascist”. And fascism seems to fit Singapore’s model well: a regime that (1) exalts the state above the individual, (2) uses violence, propaganda and censorship to forcibly suppress political opposition, (3) engages in severe economic and social regimentation, and (4) engages in corporatism. When it comes to freedom, money simply isn’t everything.

In her online article “Happy-face fascism”,<sup>5</sup> Sue Ann Tellman rightly calls Singapore’s civil society “parental authority institutionalized in a nation-state.” Judging from reports during our recent trip to Singapore, things have not changed much in the last eleven years. The single-party nanny state has produced dire proactive policies. For example, public toilets are monitored and non-flushers are fined, jay-walkers are resolutely fined, personal grooming standards (e.g., hair length) have been regulated, the sex industry is severely regulated (with prostitutes being licensed and routinely cleaned up by state-approved doctors), the press is not free and import of foreign publications is restricted. The importation, manufacture, possession, and sale of chewing gum have been banned since 1992 (except for medical purposes).<sup>6</sup>

Breaking the rules can result in beatings (with a bamboo cane), large fines, imprisonment, expulsion, and, in extreme situations, capital punishment. Hanging is the mandatory punishment for drug dealers, as one Australian teen found out in December 2005. Criminals like rapists and vandals are stripped naked and caned until their buttocks are hideously bruised and bloodied.<sup>7</sup> There is no “cruel and unusual punishments” proscription like the American Constitution’s Eighth Amendment in Singapore. My wife’s cousin Russell Compton was only in Singapore—which he referred to as a “Lego city”—for six hours. While sitting on a city bench he noticed that someone had left a piece of trash there. Fearful lest he be accused, he picked up the litter and disposed of it.

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<sup>1</sup> Singapore’s per capita GDP was nearly \$25,000 in 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Singapore is merely 264 square miles in area.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cato.org/pubs/efw/> says: “Economic Freedom of the World measures the degree to which the policies and institutions of countries are supportive of economic freedom. The cornerstones of economic freedom are personal choice, voluntary exchange, freedom to compete, and security of privately owned property.” Out of a possible 10 points, Hong Kong scored 8.7, Singapore 8.5, and the USA, Switzerland, and New Zealand were tied for third place with 8.2.

<sup>4</sup> The world busiest port is Hong Kong.

<sup>5</sup> Sue Ann Tellman (1995), “Happy-face fascism,” *New Internationalist*, issue 263 (January). The author wrote under a pseudonym so as to preserve the ability to re-enter Singapore.

<sup>6</sup> The penalty for smuggling gum into the country is a year in jail, and a 10,000 Singapore dollar (US\$6,000) fine. The ban was imposed to keep the subway running on time. Used wads of gum had been disposed of on subway train doors, preventing them from closing and disrupting service.

<sup>7</sup> Rapists suffer severe beatings. American teenager Michael Fay experienced a notorious caning in August 1993 for vandalism.

Tellman comments: “the Government promotes ‘family values’ to provide the social stability needed for continued economic growth. In the Singaporean context this means complete subservience to the state and its social dictates.” One such dictate provided for government housing on a 99 year lease basis. The leaseholds are not cheap and the majority of Singaporeans have no hope of passing on their homestead to future generations. (Only the very wealthy can afford an inheritable, non-time constrained freehold in Singapore.) At least the Singapore state is honest about who really owns the land and buildings. Social stability is also “enhanced” by tight regulation of industry and trade, often including stiff payments for the privilege of doing business. If you think this sounds a little like what America is becoming you are correct, both in terms of policies pertaining to real property “ownership” and individual liberties.

## Brave New Singapore (Part 2)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*

January 11, 2006

*This column is the second segment of a two-part series commenting on the lack of liberty in Singapore.*

Singapore may enjoy a high degree of economic prosperity but its inhabitants are hardly free. If you want to have a rousing discussion about politics, economics, sociology or culture, you won't find it in Singapore. Singapore's state fears that such discussions might lead to unwanted communist or Western liberal influences. Sue Ann Tellman notes: “The Government is uncomfortable with the notion that there may be a higher power than itself and has instituted a Religious Harmony Act which prohibits any preaching on social or political issues.”<sup>8</sup> I wonder if Evangelical pastors in Singapore have been complying with this affront to their Lord? I also wonder what Evangelical pastors and theologians in America will do when “hate crimes” enforcement becomes so stiff that pulpits become constrained by state regulators. What will it take, if anything, for American religious leaders to take a stand for liberty like our forefathers did?

The fascist state in Singapore imposes happiness on its people. The state claims to know what makes people happy and works to fulfill their needs through economic improvement and by coercive behavior modification. Yet many of the people in Singapore yearn to be free. They are willing to give up *Walden*, the Brave New World that Singapore offers, in order to be free. One Chinese taxi driver enthusiastically told me that Singapore's government was merely “modern communism”. While he liked the safety and efficiency of Singapore, he hated the lack of liberty. He said he would rather live in Thailand.

A journalist with four siblings living in America went out of her way to talk with my wife and me. She must have known it was “safe” to speak her mind to Americans in a restaurant. She, like others who spoke to us, said Singapore was an “efficient” city, much like Hitler's Germany, but compared the people to “robots”. The press is controlled and she is not allowed to criticize the government or its policies. And censure extends even further. A story we saw in the *Straits Times*<sup>9</sup> detailed the plight of a Singapore doctor who was heavily fined for criticizing another doctor's methods (and for refusing to retract her statement). One of the journalist's siblings recently decided to leave America after the Bush administration's quasi-fascist policy of mandatory fingerprinting at the border (through the Patriot Act) was begun. For him, America had begun to look and feel a little too much like fascist Singapore.

Ignorant Americans continue to support proactive public policy that supports greater “security” and state control by pragmatically supporting the Patriot Act, Homeland Security, and illegal wiretappings. There is little more than a short-lived sputter of fury for anti-freedom policies in America—like the

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<sup>8</sup> As Tellman relates: “[F]ear is all-pervasive. Even one political joke told in the wrong place can ruin a career. One Singaporean's comments explain much: ‘Boundaries have been drawn on our lives, governing everything from how to live our private lives to how extensively we can participate in the political arena. Through local newspapers, radio, television, the community centres, resident committees, People's Association and the People's Action Party itself, we have been told to have unquestioning faith in our leaders. Even if we don't, many of us will not dare to say so publicly. Those who have challenged the Government have faced imprisonment, torture, loss of all political rights or exile.’”

<sup>9</sup> December 11, 2005.

real property expropriations inspired by the *Kelo* decision, the so-called War on Drugs, and the RICO statutes. So long as the money is flowing, it seems that most Americans are apathetic about truly fighting for liberty.

Perhaps at a distance the economic prosperity of Brave New Singapore is something to be desired. (A day trip might prove an aid in convincing someone.) But my two days there, though intriguing, left me despairing for those people and yearning to leave with little desire to return. Liberty is a rare thing in the history of the world and Americans are at present squandering it—led by misguided and gullible Republicans. If Americans could only see and feel what they are losing by traveling to socially less free places then maybe they would not so willingly give up the heritage of our Founding Fathers. Let us remember that the American Colonies in 1770 were considered to be among the most prosperous places in the world. Yet the Founders were willing to risk losing it all for a chance at being truly free. What Samuel Adams said in 1776 rings true for us today: “If ye love wealth better than liberty, the tranquillity [*sic*] of servitude than the animating contest of freedom, —go from us in peace. We ask not your counsels or arms. Crouch down and lick the hands which feed you. May your chains sit lightly upon you, and may posterity forget that ye were our countrymen!” The people who choose to remain in Singapore have elected to “crouch down” before the state. Will Americans likewise deny the principles upon which their country was founded?