



The Nation Is Not a House

BY DONALD J. BOUDREAUX

Let's reflect on the rhetoric used by those who oppose greater freedom for people to move back and forth across political borders. Opponents of the freedom to move frequently analogize a nation to a house. "You lock your house, don't you?" these anti-immigrationists ask—implying that what makes sense for a home makes equally good sense for a nation.

Analogies are useful for analyses, debate, and persuasion. But just as they can enlighten, analogies can also mislead. They must be used, and heard, always with care.

The analogy of a home to a nation is more misleading than helpful. Unlike a home, a nation—at least each nation whose citizens are free—is not a private domain; it does not belong to anyone in the way that a house belongs to its owner. Also unlike in a home, living space within a free country is allocated by market transactions rather than by the conscious, non-market decisions of the residents of a house. A person who enters a country and purchases a place to live displaces no one in the way that an intruder into a home would displace a resident from his bed and favorite chair. In addition, of course, every intruder into a home likely intends to inflict some harm on the household's residents. In contrast, the vast majority of persons who enter a country intend no harm to anyone.

Moreover, in a home each and every space is private; no place in a home is open to the public. A nonresident of a home can enter only if he first secures from a resident an invitation—an invitation that is nontransferable, of limited duration, and that specifies (if only implicitly) the time and conditions of the nonresident's visit. Not

so in a nation. Each nation is full of places that generally are open to the public. Roads, boulevards, sidewalks, parks, town squares, city centers, and airports are by their nature open to people without invitation.

And more: while in a home each resident personally knows (and frequently loves) each of the other residents, in a nation the citizens overwhelmingly remain strangers to one another. The percentage of America's 300-plus million citizens whom I know is infinitesimal;

I've not even laid eyes on the vast majority of them. The same is true for every other American, including the president of the United States.

Analogizing a nation to a home creates the myth that citizens of a nation can, and do, trust each other in ways that members of the same household typically trust each other. But, of course, when I lock my home at night I do so to guard against violence and theft that might otherwise be inflicted on my family by other Americans. If every foreigner were immediately and forever expelled from the United States today, I—like all Americans—would be not one whit less vigilant in locking my home.

The fact is that the relationships each of us has with our fellow citizens overwhelmingly are of the arm's-length, impersonal variety. They are market relationships, governed chiefly by self-interest on both sides of each exchange. They are not the sorts of personal relationships that guide decisions made within households. They are, indeed, precisely the sorts of relationships that each of us has with strangers from foreign countries.

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So what value is there in analogizing a nation to a home? Very little. No one would seriously insist that each city should shut down its streets at night (on the grounds that private homes at night become inactive). No one would seriously demand that each pedestrian on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue or on New Orleans's Bourbon Street first secure a specific invitation to stroll those famous boulevards. And very few Americans would agree to give to the government the same sort of power to govern speech and personal behavior that members of each household routinely exercise over each other.

One final problem with this analogy deserves mention: if it is valid to analogize one sort of political jurisdiction (namely, the nation) to a house, it should be valid to analogize other political jurisdictions (such as states or counties or towns) to a house. Yet I've heard no one argue that Minnesota or Orange County, California, or Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y., should "secure its borders" against nonresidents of these political jurisdictions. But why not? If a political jurisdiction really is like a house, then surely the failure of the state of Minnesota to "lock its doors" is a foolhardy dereliction of responsibility.

Yes, it's true that the U.S. Constitution prohibits such "door-locking" by states and locales. But it is also true that this document of delegated and enumerated powers never delegates the power to Uncle Sam to control immigration. The Constitution does give Congress the power to determine the conditions for attaining U.S. citizenship—but it says nothing about

limiting immigration. A plausible interpretation of the Constitution's silence on this matter is that America's Founding Fathers understood that the nation is not like a house that must be "locked."

Ironically, those who speak of the nation as if it is "our" house seek to strip us Americans of some of our private property rights by deviously tapping into our justified sense of the importance of such rights. Because I secure and govern my real home—my house and my

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land located in the town of Burke, Virginia—I acknowledge the importance of my private rights to this property. And further, I strengthen this institution by acting in accordance with it. It is *my and my family's* home; it belongs to no one else. Only my wife, my son, and I control access to our property. If my neighbor appears at my door one day with a gun, asserting some imagined prerogative to keep certain of my invited guests from entering my home, my neighbor clearly would be violating my rights. His actions would diminish my freedom and rob my family and me of rights that rightfully belong to us.

And so when some Americans use government to prevent peaceful non-Americans from entering the United States, my freedom is diminished and my rights are obstructed no less than when my neighbor takes it upon himself to interfere in my affairs. The sanctity of the private home that anti-immigrationists appeal to in their attempt to justify exclusionist policies is, in fact, weakened by those policies. 