Penn's vision worth reviving 350 years later

By Dr. WILLIAM KASHATUS

Nineteen ninety-four marks the 350th anniversary of William Penn's birth. One of the greatest political philosophers and visionaries of his era, Penn is best known for nurturing a "Holy Experiment" out of the ideals of his Quaker faith.

In a 17th-century world conditioned by violence, religious intolerance and arbitrary authority, Penn established a colony dedicated to pacifism, civil liberty, and religious freedom. Nowhere else in the Western world had such ideals come to fruition as they did in this new haven of Pennsylvania.

William Kashatus

With the political corruption, increasing violence and intolerance for the less fortunate that our nation has witnessed over the last year, perhaps we would do well to recall his Holy Experiment and the spirit of brotherly love upon which it was founded.

The Holy Experiment, as Penn called it, was an experiment in participatory government, religious toleration, and humanitarian concern among a multiplicity of social groups.

Outraged by the arbitrary authority and religious intolerance of his era, Penn envisioned his new province as a haven for the oppressed of all nations.

Government would make no effort to dictate matters of individual conscience, rather it would be driven by the force men gave it.

"Let men be good," wrote Penn, "and the government cannot be bad; and if it be ill, than good men will cure it."

Penn's great faith in mankind also inspired him to nurture a spirit of peace and brotherly love among the multiplicity of religious and ethnic peoples who settled in his colony.

The greatest expression of this spirit can be found in his treatment of the Native American Indian. He learned their language, followed their customs in his dealings with them, and he expressed a deep and abiding hope that together the white man and the Indian could live in peace. His example demonstrated the power of non-violence as an effective engine of social change and mutual respect among peoples of different color.

"Let us see what love can do," he reasoned, "for if men once did see we love them we would soon find they would not harm us. Force may subdue, but love gains, and he that forgives first wins the laurel." It was this philosophy of brotherly love that allowed the first Pennsylvanians to live at peace with each other and with the Indians for nearly three-quarters of a century. It also inspired a sense of social responsibility among them .

Pennsylvanians devoted themselves to a broad array of benevolent reforms. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, they established insane asylums, medical institutions, and charity schools. They pressured the state legislature to reconsider severe penal codes, pro-slavery legislation, and policies of Indian removal. And they copied, joined, or founded societies to relieve the poor, abolish slavery, and school the young.

The success of William Penn's Holy Experiment lay not so much in the constitutional framework or benevolent institutions that still endure today, but rather in its attempt to foster a spirit of mutual respect and brotherly love among all people, regardless of their backgrounds.

To experiment is to be willing to try, possibly fail, and try again. It involves willingness to listen carefully to the ideas of others. And it requires an openness to admit mistakes as well as to accept responsibility for them.

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Over the last year we have lost sight of those lessons that once made the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania the envy of the world. Recent voter fraud in Philadelphia's Second Senate District has not only brought into question the integrity of our public officials, but also the respect they have for the judgment of the electorate, who are by right and by legacy the fountain of political authority in this country.

More unsettling has been the pervasive, random violence that has occurred in our neighborhoods and in our schools, in shopping malls, and even on a Long Island commuter train.

It seems as though we've surrendered peace of mind to the drug dealers, gang members, and gunmen who play on the fears of the law-abiding citizen and his children.

And what happened to the humanitarian concern that distinguished Pennsylvania for so long? It seems to have buckled under the weight President Clinton's plan to establish a new welfare system that will terminate support for recipients after two years with no real indication of how those who remain out of work are supposed to survive.

Many of our congressional leaders have jumped on the bandwagon. Led by Representative Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky, they gathered on Philadelphia's Main Line to explore new ways to cut entitlements. Their lack of toleration for the disadvantaged begs the question: "Just how willing are they to listen, to demonstrate some compassion for their fellow human beings?"

If Americans can transcend the cynicism and violence that our country has witnessed in the recent past, then 1994 promises to be a good year. History is on our side. After all, ours is a story that began as a dream and of that dream there are two things above all others to be said: that only visionaries like William Penn could have dreamed it or would have dared to — and that our people have in the past, demonstrated a considerable faculty for making that dream come true.

1994 can and should be the year for a new experiment. An experiment to restore peace on the streets and in our schools; to demand integrity from the individuals we elect to public office; and to renew the spirit of brotherly love that William Penn cultivated in this New World over three centuries ago.

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The libertarian and the puritanical Penn leave room for interpretation

Editor:

David Madeira's recent guest commentary, "William Penn's virtue not without bias" (April 11), raises the question of accuracy when considering the life and legacy of Pennsylvania's founding father. Writing in response to my earlier commentary, "Penn's vision worth reviving 350 years later" (Saturday, March 26), Madeira claims that my understanding of Penn as a liberal humanitarian is "inconsistent" with the founder's indefatigable spirit as a proponent of the Christian faith.

If there is an "inconsistency" here, it rests with Penn himself since he represents both characterizations.

What is important to note about Penn is that he lived his life in phases. Where he had once been liberal, almost to the point of anarchy, he was, after 1700, as sternly authoritarian as a New England Puritan. The reality of governing a diverse colony whose settlers often had competing interests blunted his earlier vision for a utopia as well as his faith in mankind. That is why in his last years, Penn even attempted to regulate the private conduct of citizens.

The open trust he once displayed for his fellowman gave way to a severe judgment of human nature and an uncompromising Christianity. Penn's writings after 1700, quoted by Madeira, reflect this change. The fine, logical reasoning and generosity of spirit that had char-acterized his earlier works now yielded to shallow rationalization and dogmatic assertion.

What's the difference? Whereas I chose to focus on the ethical significance of Penn's vision of a utopian colony, Madeira extracted what he believed to be the Christian core of that same vision. There is legitimacy to both arguments.

Regardless of Penn's ideological position, there remains a clear correlation between his vision and the recommendations I offered for our contemporary society in my earlier commentary: a restoration of peace on the streets and in our schools, a demand for integrity from the individuals we elect to public office, and a renewal of a spirit of brotherly love. Ultimately, this is the fundamental legacy of William Penn's Holy Experiment. How one chooses to interpret it is another issue.

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