THE AMERICAN DREAM IN JOHN STEINBECK'S "OF MICE AND MEN"[1]

***Abstract**: In the novel* "Of Mice and Men"*, John Steinbeck resonates with the people's endurance when subjected to social injustice. The characters, George and Lennie, are closely delineated by analogy to animals, as being either weak or powerful. They are being entrapped like rodents, yet they are potentially strong as a socio-'professional' group. More than in Steinbeck's other books, in this one the individual tragedy is manifest.*

***Keywords**: social injustice, rodents, individual tragedy.*

As generally acknowledged, John Steinbeck's books are reflections of the Great Depression; the 1930's were hard times when people were treated unfairly because of their race, gender or social class[2]. *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are among the most important novels that captured the reality of this most difficult period. It was the age when the American Dream became a nightmare. It was no longer the long desired dream for freedom that included the promise of the possibility of prosperity and success as James Truslow Adams defined it in *The Epic of America,* which he wrote in 1931:

> The American dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to achieve the fullest stature of which they are capable of, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the circumstances of birth and position. (Adams, 2001: 10)

Benjamin Franklin was one of the first who used the theme of the American Dream in his *Autobiography*. Then it was dealt with by important American writers: Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* (1977), Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman*, as well as by ethnic writers, as for example, by the Asian Americans ones.

Of Mice and Men is mainly the dream of the central characters (George and Lennie) to have a piece of land and to labour it freely. And the dream is highlighted by the existence of the rabbits that will be tended by Lennie. They play a key part in this masterpiece. In fact, most of the characters of the novel admit at some point dreaming about a different world. Unfortunately the Great Depression was a period when dreams were no longer possible. The United States of America were no longer associated with the notion of freedom. In his earlier novel, *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck writes about a possible cause of the characters' failure of dreams: "It seems to me that man has engaged in a blind and fearful struggle out of a past he can't remember, into a future he cannot foresee, nor understand. And man has met and defeated every obstacle, every enemy, except one. He cannot win over himself." (apud Watt, 1978: 57) However, the

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[2] It was a desperate and struggling period for the citizens of the United States of America that provided many artists of the era with plenty of material to write about. The social, political and economical context during the Great Depression was valuable inspiration for John Steinbeck who succeeded transforming some of his novels in records of social history. The author uses each character to portray various attitudes and personalities that reveal how some people were treated in that society.

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characters in *Of Mice and Men* are true believers in the myth of the American Dream that takes different shapes in their minds.

The episode that inspired Steinbeck to write *Of Mice and Men* really occurred while he was working as a bindle stiff himself in the 1920s. He told a *New York Times* reporter in 1937 that Lennie was a real person. He worked alongside with him for a few weeks. But he did not kill a girl but a foreman. The message of the book becomes even more powerful as the protagonist is a believable contemporary figure. Although many critics agreed that *Of Mice and Men* is not a social criticism on the same level as *The Grapes of Wrath* or *In Dubious Battle*, the novel describes the aimless existence of the migrant farm workers in the Depression era, California. George and Lennie are the usual group consisting only of two people who dream that they will own their own farm one day. Even before they get to their new job on the ranch, they wish to make enough money to live independently and have no boss anymore. They believe that the new job will last long enough to accomplish their dream. But the reader knows from the beginning it will not come true because Lennie is a physical giant with the small brain capacity who is always causing trouble around him. He is presented as having the personality of a child fascinated with rabbits; he is obsessed with petting mice, rabbits, puppies, or touching girls' soft dresses. At the beginning of the novel *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie keeps a mouse in his pocket whom he continues stroking even after he had accidentally killed him. Later he is given a puppy to take care of, but he cannot control his strength and a new similar accident happens.

George and Lennie are the symbols of the poor ranch hands who wish to work for anyone but themselves. Their perfect world is one of independence. They cannot control their lives, as they have to do what the landowner tells them. And probably one of the most important issues of the ranch workers during this time as reflected in each and every character in *Of Mice and Men* is solitude: " 'Guys like us, that work on ranches,' George told Lennie, 'are the loneliest guys in the world.'" (Steinbeck, 1993: 13-14) Even the town where the action takes place is called Soledad, "[…] an abbreviation for Our Lady of Loneliness (*as Los Angeles is short for Our Lady of the Angels*) […]" (Lisca, 1978: 86) However, George and Lennie are lucky as they travel together. George is more realistic and he is not so trustful as Lennie that their dream will get accomplished in the end. But Lennie who lives for this dream believes that they will not have the same fate: " 'But not us,' Lennie interrupted. 'We got a future. Some day gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow an' some pigs, an' live off the fatta the lan'- an' have rabbits! An' I get to tend the rabbits.'" It is natural for men in their situation to wish to work on their own farm and to be their own masters. This dream started as a simple story that George told Lennie in order to keep him calm or to make him focus on work. For Lennie, the imagined story gets immediately transformed into a dream while George, after some time, started to believe in this dream himself. Besides their common dream, George and Lennie have each a separate dream. Lennie is dreaming about tending rabbits of different colours while George hopes to set free from Lennie one day: "God a'mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could get a job an' work, an' no trouble."(Steinbeck, 1993: 11) But they both know that they are inseparable, as they cannot live without each other: "[…] they can be seen as two parts of a single being […]" (Peter Lisca, 1978: 78) They know that in an indifferent world their lives would be more miserable and they would feel isolated if they separated.

Throughout the novel there is one thing Lennie never forgets: his dream of tending the rabbits. Every time Lennie does not feel safe, he insists upon George telling and retelling him the same story about the wonderful life they are going to have on the

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farm that they will buy some day: " 'An' rabbits', Lennie said eagerly. 'An' I'd take care of 'em. Tell how I'd do that, George.' 'Sure, you'd go in the alfalfa patch an' you'd have a sack. You'd fill up the sack and bring it in an' put it in the rabbit cages.' 'They will nibble an' nibble,' said Lennie, 'the way they do. I see 'em'" (Steinbeck, 1993:11). Whenever George and Lennie's dream is recounted, Lennie's tending the rabbits is always highlighted. Every time he speaks to somebody, he keeps on turning to his rabbits he wants so much to pet. Even when he is in the barn with Curley's wife who tells him about her dreams, he makes the same point: "Curley's wife said angrily: 'Don't you think of nothing but rabbits?' 'We gonna have a little place' Lennie explained patiently. 'We gonna have a house an' a garden and a place for alfalfa an' that alfalfa is for the rabbits […]'" (Steinbeck, 1993: 89)

The topos of the little furry animals appear in a rhythmic pattern throughout the novel, from the beginning to the end. At the beginning of the book, the author introduces the rabbits that make the scenery look like a place from Eden[1]. They happily "come out of the bush to sit on the sand"; then, disturbed by George and Lennie, they "hurry noiselessly for cover." (Steinbeck, 1993:1) Using this image, Steinbeck foreshadows that something fearful will happen and all their dreams will ruin in the end.

However, the topos of the rabbits has a richer significance. In the mythology of the Amerindians, a rabbit is a mediator between the human world and that of the dead. According to Chevalier's Dictionary of Symbols, the rabbit is the symbol of the moon. In almost all mythologies, rabbits are the symbol of a happy life full of good and pleasure. In *Of Mice and Men*, they become the symbol of George and especially of Lennie's dream of having their own farm, a Garden of Eden. They hope to find there a *safe place* where they could lead a wonderful life. But this dream will be just an illusion as it becomes evident that these symbolic rabbits will have the same end as the rabbits crushed by Lennie's simple blundering strength. And thus the fate of the rabbits will also become the fate of *the safe place*. There is an inner condition Lennie cannot control; he never means to do anything wrong, but he cannot help touching soft things with his enormous but sensitive hands. Unfortunately he kills without intention everything he touches.

For George and Lennie, *the safe place* is the farm that George constantly describes to Lennie:

> "Well," said George, "we'll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter we'll just say the hell with going to work, and we'll build up a fire in the stove and set around it an' listen to the rain comin' down on the roof…" (Steinbeck, 1937: 18)

The dream about this farm is what keeps them going. For George, it is an antidote to loneliness and disappointment. Both are aware that owning a farm would offer them not only an easy living, but most important, protection in an inhospitable world. Although not so optimistic as Lennie, George wants to believe that they will have a free and idyllic life soon. While giving a full description of the dream, the narrator endows the farm with Eden-like qualities: "We would live offa the fatta the lan'." (Steinbeck, 1993: 57) They hope that all the food they want will be right there without too much effort. George continues describing the farm in terms of things he loved when he was a child, which offers the reader a hint that this dream will not come true in the end as childhood is a period in every person's life that passes and never comes back: "I could build a smoke house like the one grandpa' had…" (Steinbeck,

[1] As the rabbits are among the animals that populated Heaven at the time of Adam and Eve.

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1993:57) He imagines the farm as having the beauty of his childhood: "An' we'd keep a few pigeons to go flyin' around the win'mill like they done when I was a kid."(Steinbeck, 1993:57)

At first, only George and Lennie shared the dream farm. It is a powerful dream however, and it becomes irresistible for Candy and even for the sceptical Crooks. It is not the absence of work or having a lot of money that they yearn after, but having some place to belong to, as they have no home, no family. Although George and Lennie always tried to keep their future plans secret, Candy overhears them talking about the dream farm: "You know a place like that?" (Steinbeck, 1937: 59) Because in their world such a dream is just a trifle and not so precious as it is to them, George and Lennie's first reaction was to jump as if they had been caught doing something shameful. Candy becomes interested in their plan. Much older, hunchbacked and having only one hand, Candy is a swamper and fears that his age is making him useless. He is aware he does not have much time left and no place to go, and explains to George he would be grateful to him if he let him live on their future farm until he dies in exchange for a large sum of money he has saved. He is afraid that he will have the same fate as his dog that was killed because it was no longer useful on the ranch.

This dream works like a spell since even the cynical Crooks seems ready to believe it. Just like George and Lennie, he perceives the farm house as a piece of Eden: "I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches with their bindles on their back an' that same damn thing in their heads. […] Just like heaven." (Steinbeck, 1993: 74) However, he is more sceptical: "Ever'body wants a little piece of lan'.[…] Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land."(Steinbeck, 1993: 74) He dreams about being treated just like everyone else on the ranch; his living on George and Lennie's future farm would offer him the chance to be equal. Because of his race, he is treated like an outcast. He has to sleep in the harness room instead of the bunkhouse and he is rejected from most activities: "Cause I'm black. They play cards in there, but I can't because I'm black. They say I stink…" (Steinbeck, 1993: 68) Thus, he feels isolated and lonely when he says: "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make any difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya. I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick." (Steinbeck, 1993: 72) Although a very intelligent person, Crooks feels inferior and weak in his confrontation with Curley's wife who says: "Well you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." (Steinbeck, 1993: 81) She reminds him of his place in society because of his skin colour and makes Crooks lose his self-esteem.

"The Eve who occasions the destruction of all men's hopes,"(Watt, 1978: 61) alias Curley's wife has a dream as well[1].. Although different in detail from the other character's dreams, her dream is similar in desires. She yearns for material comforts and friendship just like the other men as each and every character suffers from solitude: "I get lonely.[…] You can't talk to people but I can't talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. How'd you like not to talk to anybody?" (Steinbeck, 1993: 87) She wants to become a famous Hollywood actress dreaming of fame, fortune, and expensive hotels, fancy clothes. Her marriage to Curley destroys this dream because once she gets married; Curley will not permit her to leave the ranch to become an actress. Her life becomes a failure, as she is the wife of a man whom she does not love but hates.

[1] She does not have a name, as Steinbeck wanted to emphasize the humble status of women in the United States of America during the Depression.

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The destinies of Curley's wife and of Lennie go hand in hand; they are linked by their solitude. They are both rejected by the men on the ranch who do not want to have anything to do with them. They need each other to put end to their painful lives and, at the same time, they spoil each other's dream. Although Lennie is good in intention he is evil in fact. He tries to express affection but strokes too hard the soft hair of Curley's wife. He is too violent and snaps her neck trying to force her to be quiet. It is something he cannot help. It is the moment when he is afraid that this would make George too angry and ruin his dream about petting the rabbits. For Lennie, tending the rabbits whose fur he likes so much to touch is the equivalent of his future happiness. He feels very proud when he dreams about George entrusting him to raise the rabbits, to feed them, to protect them. Doing something "bad" –whether killing a puppy or Curley's wife- seems to be in Lennie's mind the equivalent to George not allowing him to care for rabbits. He does not see his actions in terms of good or evil. Lennie acknowledges that if he is not allowed to tend the rabbits then he has done something bad; this can suggest that he is not fit for the society described in *Of Mice and Men.* In the novel, Steinbeck does not present Lennie like a monster; because without intention he acts destructively in moments of fear without intention, he becomes a sympathetic figure. Any reader would regard him not only with despair but also with affection as his only companion and friend, George.

The only sight of a rabbit that Lennie can have is a hallucination after the death of Curley's wife. The dream takes the form of an illusion at the end of the novel when Lennie first has the vision of his aunt Clara who scolds him. Then he hallucinates about giant rabbit that tells him that he will never be permitted to tend the rabbits: "[…] out of Lennie's head there came a gigantic rabbit. It sat on its haunches in front of him, and it waggled its ears and crinkled his nose to him." (Steinbeck, 1993: 102) The huge Rabbit is in fact the embodiment of his fear. Lennie cries in his own defence, being afraid that he will lose the privilege of tending the rabbits. He is doomed to killing, as he cannot help shaking the small creatures till their necks are broken.

His killing of Curley's wife awakens George to the impossibility of their dreamed of farm. He has to admit that the bitter Crooks is right: such paradises of freedom, contentment, and safety are not to be found in this world. Just like the reader, George knows that their dream will not get accomplished in the end. Lennie's actions just as the actions of a mouse are predictable. After killing mice and a puppy with his tenderness and uncontrolled power, George knows that he will not stop killing. He understands Lennie only too well, and wants him to die with the image of their dream farm in front of his eyes. The final scene shows Lennie calling George who tells him the story of the farm they are going to have one day, just like a father who tells a bedtime story to his son. But this time it is told for the very last time. He tells Lennie to look across the river and imagine their farm: "And live on the fatta the lan'" (Steinbeck, 1993: 110) While telling about the places they are going to have, out of real affection for him, George shoots Lennie in order to prevent a worse death. Thus, Lennie dies with the hope that their dream will get accomplished soon. But George is not permitted such comfort. He has to live with the guilt of having killed his friend and has to go on living with the failure of their dream. Although he should have felt free from a burden like Lennie, he feels now even more miserable as there is no other dream to strive for.

When reading *Of Mice and Men,* the reader has to acknowledge the inevitability of some situations that are part of an unforgiving world. Despite George and Lennie's efforts, their dreams fail. Lennie dies and George continues living in loneliness and without any hope. None of the other characters ever achieve their

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dreams. In this novel, dreams are ways in which the characters try to defeat the hopelessness of their existence, as John Steinbeck himself stated: "Everyone in the world has a dream he knows can't come off, but spends his life hoping it may." (Steinbeck, 1975: 105) The topos of disillusionment or failure is acknowledged as part of existence; in this respect, Peter Lisca upholds, "The ending of the story is… neither tragic nor brutal but simply a part of the pattern of event." (1978: 76)

Most of Steinbeck's contemporary critics perceived the novel as the embodiment of non-teleological thinking, according to which events are beyond humankind's comprehension and control. Steinbeck's best friend, Edward Richetts, coined the term non-teleological thinking; the two men shared the same philosophy: to accept life on its own terms. They emphasized the need to see life as clearly as a scientist and to focus not on ends but on the process of life, the Aristotelian cause of nature. The same idea is perceived in the novel *Of Mice and Men*. Under the influence of the Great Depression, Steinbeck describes the fate of the common man, lonely and hopeless in his struggle to survive, dreaming about a future that will never come to pass. The writer seems to say, "this is the way things are," just as epitomized by the original title of the novel, "Something that Happened."[1]

Lennie, himself something of a mouse, is killed because of his vulnerability. Like mice that suffer for being physically small, Lennie is the victim of his mental smallness. Both mice and men suffer from the randomness of their fate[2]. Lennie has to die because he cannot control his fatal strength. But Lennie is not the only one in the novel who is doomed. Curley cannot stop being a beast of jealousy; George cannot give up his dream. They cannot control their own actions and eventually their own destiny. The only exception is Slim, the jerkline skinner, the tall man with the "God-like eyes." (Steinbeck, 1993: 78). Critics consider that he is the voice of the writer, acting above the humans like Lennie, George or Candy.

In Steinbeck's novel[3], poverty draws the human and the natural worlds closer together. Poverty has reduced the characters in *Of Mice and Men* to animals. the author's characters are more animal-like than human, as Edmund Wilson wrote in an essay in 1940. The two men, especially Lennie, are described in animal similes: Lennie drags his feet "the way a bear drags his paws" and drinks from the pool "like a horse." (Steinbeck, 1993: 9) He even dreams about living in a cave like a bear. Human actions are foreshadowed by the actions of animals. Lennie embodies the double image of animal and of man as Steinbeck outlines man's condition in the novel *In Dubious Battle*: "I believe that man is a double thing, a group animal and, at the same time an individual. And it occurs to me that he cannot successfully be the second until he has

[1] The title *Of Mice and Men* comes from an eighteenth century poem by Robert Burns entitled "To a Mouse" that has become widely known and quoted: But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,/ In proving foresight may be vain:/ The best laid schemes o' mice and men/ Gang aft a –gley /An' leave us nought but grief an' pain/ For promis'd joy// (Robert Burns, 1950: 84) In the poem, Robert Burns extends the mouse's experience to mankind while in *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck extends the experience of the two migrant workers to the human condition. The dream of the two workers is never to be. The ending of the novel, like the field mouse 's nest being destroyed by a plow, is not tragic but simply a part of the pattern of events. The plans of men are not safer than those of the mouse, and this is the point of Steinbeck's title.

[2] From the biggest to the smallest or the most intelligent creatures, the cruel fate will not forget anyone.

[3] In Burns' poem as well

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fulfilled the first." (Steinbeck, 1959: 144-145) Animals and humans, being all mortal, are entangled in this cruel and selfish world.

As a naturalist yet unlike Crane, London, Dreiser, Norris, Steinbeck accepts man's condition as being that of just another animal in an infinite and indifferent universe. He perceives life from a biological perspective. After studying the complex marine organism, the writer came to understand the human behaviour in comparison with the animal one. He considered the biological approach as a really great perspective for one's understanding the phenomenon of group or community behaviour. This philosophy fascinated Steinbeck and this new personal outlook on life made him love every variety of life as it is, not as it should be: "a love which could look with equanimity at human freaks and social outcasts."(Lisca, 1978: 106) Here we can include Lennie, a giant with the power of ten men, but with the mind of a child. He lives in a harsh world where only the strongest survive - this is the only rule that seems to work. Yet *Of Mice and Men* does not portray the world of the strongest only; the author reveals the hard life of the weakest yet the purest as well. Many of the novel's characters are discriminated because they are handicapped (Lennie is mentally inferior; Candy does not have one hand) or are not treated as equal (Crooks has to suffer because he is black). They live in a world where the classical values no longer exist; it a society where people swear a lot, go to brothels, talk about sex. Many of them are discriminated because of their race, age or sex. There are featured such tremendous killings and violence that the book has been frequently banned in schools. Steinbeck uses his characters to criticize bitterly a society that makes its people feel completely worthless as they live at a time when they are not able to support themselves anymore. Their dreams never come true and their destiny is that of unhappiness and solitude. All the notions about the happy American way of life get vanished.

In creating the characters in *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck clearly draws on the biological concept - the environmental fitness. They seem to be unfit for the community where they live because of their race, physical or intellectual abilities, their social status; these are also reasons why they are isolated. Firstly, Lennie is not allowed to take part in any social activity because of his mental disability. The other men on the ranch do not want to include him in such activities as horseshoes: "From outside came the clang of horse shoes on the playing peg and the shouts of men, playing, encouraging, jeering." (Steinbeck, 1993: 8) Just like George and Lennie, Candy and Crooks suffer from isolation. They are treated differently from the other ranch men because of their social class; they are offered unrewarding jobs; they are not happy and for this reason they dream about getting their own farm. Crooks –the black stable hand- is a representative of the oppressed black people in America; he feels isolated from the other men because of the colour of his skin.

An apparently cynical and indifferent attitude towards both people and animals is encoded. Candy's dog is shot without a second thought just because it smells bad[1]. Although there were better solutions –a bath, a new place to live- the more fit members of the bunkhouse society decide his destiny. In this world only the strongest are right. The dog is in fact the symbol of the cruel fate of the feeble. People have forgotten not only the master-dog bond, but all bonds. In the tough times of the Great Depression, they have forgotten the bonds they can make to each other. Slim, the wise skinner, said to himself: "Ain't many guys travel 'round together. I don't know why. Maybe

[1] People have forgotten that dogs offer us companionship and have stayed by our sides throughout the ages.

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ever'body in the whole damn world is scared of each other." (Steinbeck, 1993: 35) Although they all have the same low place in the social hierarchy, they remain isolated and continue to be treated disrespectfully; but, as Steinbeck suggests, so is life. If they had not remained individualized but rather collective, they could have found power in numbers. But they are helpless, weak, predictable, and entrapped in a similar way to the little rodents that Steinbeck makes allusion to so many times throughout the novel as he describes the activity of the natural world.

Rabbits also epitomize the universe of the novel *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck foregrounds the rabbits many times so as to reveal Lennie's unfulfilled dream, as they are all he hopes. They offer the simple 'access' to the soft fur that he likes so much to touch. Rabbits are a source of comfort for Lennie. Some readers may wonder why John Steinbeck emphasized rabbits so much in the novel *Of Mice and Men*. Critics found an answer: rabbits played a major role during the Great Depression in the American society and especially in California. Even the U.S. Government encouraged the raising of rabbits for meat. In the 1940's the sales of rabbit meat were above those of poultry sales. But as America started to become prosperous, rabbits were no longer bought for their meat but as house pets.

The conclusion to this work is probably best revealed in Paul McCarthy's words:

> In the last analysis, George and Lennie symbolize something of the enduring and hopeful as well as the meaningless. They manage – if only for a brief time – to rise above circumstances and to convince others as well as themselves that dreams are part of the territory, that all they have to do is keep working and hoping and some day they will have their own place. If they only somehow control their weaknesses and keep a little ahead of circumstances, but they cannot. (McCarthy, 1980: 102)

George and Lennie struggle against the injustice of the world and at the same time against their own weak features that are part not only of the human nature, but also of the 'animal' world. Despite his physical size and strength, Lennie is powerless in front of the universal laws just like the little rodents.

The novel *Of Mice and Men* is not just a book about a particular time and space. It is timeless because it includes elements that are part of every human being's existence: suffering determined by isolation and solitude, friendship, sacrifice; the most important message of the book is probably the futility of one's holding onto dreams. Because of some stark observations, the novel may seem pessimistic. Still, the writer suggests that dreams keep people going on when they normally would have given up. Dreams are part of the human nature; even in an abnormal society people can dream; nobody can take this right away from them.

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