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FREEDOM AND THE SOLDIER

by

ALISTAIR COOKE

The word "freedom" has a positive, an irreducible, meaning for Americans as much as anybody, but it has become, especially in our lifetime, a buzzword, like establishment, fascist, liberal, identity, conservative, reactionary, or alienated. "Freedom" is a word passionately invoked by politicians, fuzzily distorted by every special interest, claimed as an unqualified right by pornographers, leftists, and sentimentalists, freely used by everybody, and defined by very few.

In treating the topic of freedom and the soldier, I shall avoid the favorite pastime of civilian commentators: telling the military where they went wrong. Although in a democracy we keep to the famous and sensible belief that war is too important to be left to the generals, I have seen enough of civilians running policy in wartime to know that nobody is more bloodthirsty, more exhilarated by the "game" of war, than presidential assistants who are new to it. They give force to C. E. Montague's celebrated line: "Hell hath no fury like a noncombatant."

In contrast to the bellicose civilian, it was General William Tecumseh Sherman who said, "War is sheer barbarism." It was General Douglas MacArthur who begged President Kennedy not to commit American forces to Vietnam and who at the end of his life said, "I am a one-hundred percent disbeliever in war." It was General Dwight D. Eisenhower who, sooner than any civilian, saw the new and dangerous relationship which technology would forge between the civilian and the soldier: "In the councils of government we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex."

As a citizen of this country and not less of the shrinking world we call free, I hope my credentials for addressing the subject of freedom are sufficient. I am a boy from Lancashire, the kingdom of the Red Rose, as Yorkshire was the kingdom of the White Rose. And though, when I was a boy, the Wars of The Roses had been over for

more than 400 years (after Henry the Seventh had got to the throne—a Lancastrian, I am happy to say), I was nevertheless brought up in the almost religious belief that all Englishmen were and ought to be free, except Yorkshiremen.

As a boy I saw the Lancashire regiments go off from the Manchester railroad stations to France and more remote theaters of war and saw perhaps a half of them come back. Then came peace, and then famine, among the ravaged countries of Europe. And I went to college and had the luck, as a very nonpolitical person, to interrupt my long Cambridge honeymoon with a spell of teaching in Germany. There, in Munich, I once listened to a speech by a rabble rouser whom nobody on the outside was paying much attention to. But I found myself, like the rest of the small outdoor audience, hypnotized by this powerful and subtle man. His name was Adolf Hitler.

In Dresden, I was taken to a restaurant where the waiter, against the manager's instructions, seated us at a table by the window. At the first appearance of a slice of meat on a plate, children sprang up from nowhere and tottered over to stare through the window: small children with black circles under their eyes, rib cages as well-defined as in an X-ray, and bellies swollen like balloons. Then the cops came swarming in and beat them off.

Back at school in Silesia, I was surrounded by country people so ground down by depression, hunger, and the vengeful conditions imposed on them by the Allies that the best they could do was scrape for food and dream of the dignity of a job and a halfway decent home. It would have been an insult to the facts of their life to talk to them about such rosy abstractions as civil rights or freedom. Survival was all. Then Hitler, shrewdly recognizing the usefulness of scapegoats and villains, told them they were a fine, upstanding people cheated by the Allies and gouged by the Jews. In relief and thanksgiving, they rallied to him. Some of the schoolmasters I knew went underground politically, and one or two of them, God knows, literally. It was my first political lesson in the frailty of freedom.

"No amount of political freedom," wrote Lenin, one month before the Russian Revolution, "will satisfy the hungry masses." It is a sentence worth remembering whenever you come on the unemployment statistics, or consider that in the black slums of America one boy in three between the ages of 15 and 22 not only has no job but has only the remotest prospect of getting one in his foreseeable future. To him, freedom is a luxury cruise on the other side of a pay envelope. When there are enough of him, of any race, and when their primary needs go unheeded, a free society is in trouble. It will erupt into disorder and social chaos, as Germany did, and it will be pacified only by the arrival of a leader who suspends the laws and imposes his own.

I never believed that America was given freedom by act of God. When Senator Joseph McCarthy, in the early 1950's, was hounding everybody, including the Army, for beliefs which, on the thinnest of evidence, they were alleged to hold, I thought we were very fortunate not to have—as we'd had 20 years earlier—13 million unemployed. I believe that, under such conditions, he could have torn up the Constitution.

Simply, when a free society is hit by depression, or by uncontrollable inflation, no citizen is confronted by such an ordeal of conscience as the soldier. Is he committed to restore a kind of order that accords with his belief in freedom, or is he sworn to restore order *at all costs*? Does he obey his principles or the Fuehrer? I met Prussian officers of the best type who, finding this dilemma too uncomfortable to live with, retreated into the technicalities of their profession, thus cutting themselves off from their bullied nation, and kept up their morale by privately despising Hitler and all his works. Some of the more philosophical of them did this, I am sure, not out of cowardice but out of the professional conviction that Herman Melville's Captain Vere expressed to the naval court in *Billy Budd*: "In receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents . . . we fight at command. If our judgments approve the war, that is but coincidence." It is a tragic dilemma that has plagued servicemen ancient

and modern, fictional and real, from Brutus to Captain Vere, from Billy Mitchell to Erwin Rommel.

I should guess that even in peacetime, and in times of what the Founding Fathers called "domestic tranquility," one of the psychological hazards of being a soldier is nothing less than the insularity of the soldier's life: the sense of being isolated from the society he is pledged to defend. He is not entirely alone in this. Think, for example, of a professional athlete, who in many respects is apart from his society of fans. Or think of the lawyer, of whom everybody, including the doctor, is a client. Or think of the doctor, of whom everybody, including the lawyer, is a patient. But these professionals do not live together in a compound outside the bounds of general society like the soldier. Yet, soldiers are also citizens, part of the mass of people. And I should like to see all servicemen regularly reminded of the varieties of freedom that America's citizens claim: businessmen, labor union leaders, welfare workers, hospital directors, lawyers, farmers, shopkeepers, longshoremen, drug rehabilitators, congressmen, women's liberators, abortionists, anti-abortionists, nurses, engineers. To gain a sense of the brotherhood of free men and women that binds us all together, servicemen need sympathetic familiarity with the jobs of other professional groups—familiarity with how they work and fail to work. Even bankers of no general intelligence whatsoever have one lobe of the brain that is expert in the moving or making of money, and it is worth probing.

If there is one thing I learned from 30 years as a foreign correspondent—roaming around every corner of this country and talking one day with a senator and then with a trucker, with a hospital orderly or a Mafia chieftain, with an oil expert in Oklahoma, a tattooist in San Diego, a sheep-sluicer in west Texas—I learned at first hand that no profession is as simple as it seems to an outsider and that a free society is a great deal harder to run than an authoritarian one, if only because of the great range of citizen opinion, prejudice, and self-interest, and the difficulty of disciplining these lively feelings in the general interest.

Time and again in our government, we see the votes in Congress decided not by a free judgment of the majority, but by the successful pressure of a minority interest: that is, by the self-interest of a powerful lobby, which is yielded to because every congressman hopes that next time he can get a majority vote for *his* favorite lobby. Some people deplore this as a new and dangerous tyranny, a tyranny of factions, of special interests. But James Madison, even before political parties were invented in this country, looked on the conflict of factions as a healthy sign, as indeed the essence of representative government. He insisted only that there be plenty of different factions attached to the interests of different parts of the country. "In government," he said, "ambition must be made to counter ambition."

The most effective way to cut through the babel of competing voices and interests is to get strong leadership, of course. And we hear a great deal today, and always in an election year, of the need, the hunger, for a strong leader. It is a mischievous longing. For

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Arnold Newman

it is one of the permanent contradictions of a democratic society that strong personal leadership is only possible during a war, when many democratic liberties (the First Amendment, for example) have to be suspended.

Of course, one might question the notion that democratic liberties have practical application to the soldier. After all, he lives in a closed society and has chosen at the start to abide by a system of rules and taboos that are not required on the outside, that, in fact, millions of Americans might regard as denials of freedom itself. But such a question arises only because we are living in a time when "freedom" is given a definition so boundless that a whole generation wallows in the notion that the First Amendment gives Americans a license to do anything they want, at any time, in any place. This generation seems to echo the words of a famous English political leader: "Real freedom means good wages, short hours, security in employment, good homes, opportunity for leisure, and recreation with family and friends." That sounds like a universal prescription. It is what every politician—whether Republican, Communist, Liberal, Democrat, Socialist, or Conservative—is offering us, what, indeed, television advertising is all about. I wonder if the applause for that sentence would continue if we reveal its author. He was Oswald Mosley, announcing the true faith as leader of the British Fascist Party! These promises have nothing to do with freedom. One can have "good wages, short hours, security in employment, good homes, opportunity for leisure, and recreation with family and friends" in a nation in which a personal opinion, a dissenting speech, a disturbing scientific discovery, the booing of a public speaker, is a passport to exile, a labor camp, a prison, a psychiatric hospital, or a firing squad.

Freedom is a good deal more than general comfort, and much more demanding. It may be news to some people to hear that liberty demands anything. But, for one thing, it demands voluntary acceptance of limits on freedom itself. Many people today, however, have adopted the maxim: "I can do what I like provided it doesn't seem to hurt other people." Over 80 years ago, the greatest of American jurists, Mr. Justice Holmes, commented aptly on such people. "The liberty of the citizen," he wrote, "to do as he likes so long as he does not interfere with the liberty of others to do the same has [become] a shibboleth. . . . [But] it is interfered with by school laws, by the Post Office, by every state or municipal institution which takes his money for purposes thought desirable whether he likes it or not."

Mr. Justice Holmes wrote this opinion at a time when nobody seriously questioned the sense or necessity of school laws, or Post Office regulations, or the need to be taxed to maintain state or municipal institutions. But there was then, as now, a popular rhetoric of freedom which blinds otherwise intelligent people to the parts of life that have to do with freedom and the parts that do not. Well into this century it was taken for granted that a doctor, or a policeman, or a fireman would always be on hand. When the police of Boston, in 1919, following the example of the police of London and Liverpool, organized in a union to press as a body for decent wages, they astounded the nation by going on strike. After an ugly 24-hour bout of looting, the Army was called in. Calvin Coolidge, the Governor of Massachusetts, made an announcement which to the rest of the country had the force of Holy Writ: "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time." This recital of the obvious, and it was obvious in those days, brought him a wire of congratulations from President Wilson; the next year, the vice-presidential nomination of his party; and two years later (by the grace of God's disposal of Warren Harding) the presidency.

I do not think today it would bring him anything but defiance and uproar. In Coolidge's time, society had the positive restraints of institutional religion, and the negative restraints of the general unthinkability of many forms of outrageous behavior. Together, these checks disciplined, or at worst cowed, the vast majority of people into socially acceptable behavior. Today,

religion has lost its restraining power, even in predominantly religious nations; obedience to constituted authority is widely confused with authoritarianism; and almost anything is thinkable, including frequent assertions of the rights of citizenship which implicitly deny that citizenship carries any duties at all (such as being counted in the census or submitting to registration for military service).

Some time ago, there was a parade in Princeton of young protesters against the idea of draft registration. One sign carried the slogan: "There is Nothing Worth Dying For." That seems to me to be the witless end of Know-Nothingism. If enough Americans felt that way, this nation would long ago have succumbed to dictatorship.

But this feeling, too, is nothing new. It is a feeling that disrupts most societies in the exhaustion of a long war. We had our draft riots during the Civil War, race riots during the Second World War, and an unprecedented outcry against the war in Vietnam. In the middle 1930's, the memory of the enormous slaughter of the First World War was still so green that, when Hitler went on the rampage, the prospect of war actually stimulated, in millions of Europeans, a longing for peace at any price. This disillusion suppressed the recognition that some things have to be fought for. So much so, that there was a powerful and popular slogan that helped Britain put its head in the sand. It was "Against War and Fascism," a cry about as sensible as "Against Hospitals and Disease." It was chanted most fervently by people who were willing to do absolutely anything to get rid of Hitler, except fight him. This muddled thinking persisted until it was almost too late. The Munich agreement may have been, as Churchill said at the time, "a total and unmitigated defeat," but, because the popular mood had impressed itself on the Conservative Government in the form of believing that if you do not re-arm you will not have to fight, Munich became an essential, a very necessary, surrender. Britain did not have the power to protect the freedom of Czechoslovakia, or its own. London had two antiaircraft guns.

It will be no news to soldiers that their profession is not popular. It rarely has been in the United States. Today it is a profession especially despised by morally superior people, whose sense of moral superiority is, in fact, made possible by the soldier's existence. Of 55 nations that can lay claim to being "free," many of them allied to us, the United States is one of the few that have no system of military conscription. And yet, the volunteer Army is not working because there are not enough high-quality volunteers. The Chief of Naval Operations recently announced that the poor pay of skilled petty officers is stripping the Navy of enough men to run its ships.

I am not advocating military conscription. I am saying that it is not a sign of our superior freedom that we do not have it, only of our superior optimism. Perhaps it is a sign of our general feeling that, in view of the Soviet and American possession of the thermonuclear bomb and the well-publicized stalemate of a "balance of terror," a conventional war is impossible (in spite of the glaring fact that, precisely because the use of the bomb is unthinkable, there have been more conventional wars in the past quarter century than in all the 19th century).

I think, too, that our strong resistance to any compulsory service proposed by the national government is a sharp reflection of what I believe to be our striking preference for equality over liberty; if all men are created equal, then I'm just as good as you, whoever you are, and probably better. At any rate, I should not like to see the results of a national survey of honest opinion about whether we cherish liberty more than equality, or comfort more than either. It was a very comfortable, self-indulgent, and wealthy author, Somerset Maugham, who saw the French refugees in 1940, rich as well as poor, trudging the roads in flight from the oncoming Nazis on their way, no doubt, to Maugham's own luxurious villa in the south of France. He found himself saying something that most of his readers would not have expected from his lips: "If a nation values anything more than freedom, it will

lose its freedom; and the irony of it is that if it is comfort or money that it values more, it will lose those too."

In our time, then, when we see comfort, and anarchy, and even violence, being claimed as expressions of freedom, and when many peaceable and well-meaning people seem unaware that individual liberty has its limits, what is the effective form of social discipline? Plainly, it is no longer church or even appeals to the sanctity of the law. The only safeguard, as I see it, is the safeguard of what most people *feel they ought not to do*, a voluntary belief in what I might call a code of accepted taboos. I have said this elsewhere, and I repeat it here without apology because I cannot say it any better:

> As for the rage to believe that we have found the secret of liberty in general permissiveness from the cradle on, this seems to me to be a disastrous sentimentality, which, whatever liberties it sets loose, loosens also the cement that alone can bind any society into a stable compound: a code of obeyed taboos. I can only recall the saying of a wise Frenchman that 'liberty is the luxury of self-discipline.' Historically those peoples that did not discipline themselves had discipline thrust on them from the outside. That is why the normal cycle in the life and death of great nations has been: first, a powerful tyranny, broken by revolt, then the enjoyment of liberty, then the abuse of liberty, and then back to tyranny again. As I see it, in this America, a land of the most persistent idealism and the blandest cynicism, the race is on between its decadence and its vitality.

To come back to the ordeal of the Prussian officers under Hitler, ultimately what matters is not how you look to the government. It matters how, if you are religious, you look to your Maker; if you are not religious, how you look to your conscience, which is the seedbed of honor (a word very rarely used by honorable people, who tend to stay mum in recollection of Emerson's sound principle: "The more he talked about honor, the faster we counted our spoons.").

I do not fool myself that all soldiers join the army in order to defend liberty. Every profession has its morbid attractions. Think of the surgeon who has found a socially sanctioned exercise in sadism; the social scientist who has found a quick formula to be a know-it-all; the psychiatrist who chooses a profession in which he is always right at the other person's expense. We have all, I hope, learned how often, how almost automatically, in many countries of South and Central America the army is the obvious weapon to call on when it is wanted to stifle freedom as quickly as possible.

But to the extent that soldiers are ready to sacrifice the easy life to defend, not what is craven, or greedy, or brutal, or muddled about our society, but what is free and humane about it, they deserve the plaudits of free men and women everywhere.