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We Are Your Bad Conscience **by Lawrence M. Ludlow**

The members of the White Rose still speak to us today, and during a recent trip to Munich, I was able to explore the place where this heroic group of German dissidents crafted their powerful message. Some readers already may be familiar with the White Rose as a result of articles posted at The Future of Freedom Foundation or from books and movies, most recently *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, which was released in 2005.

These readers know that “the White Rose” was the name taken by a small group of university students in Munich, Germany, during World War II. Along with their professor, contributors, and volunteers, members of the White Rose, in a series of six leaflets, bravely denounced Nazism, the war, and their widespread acceptance by German society. These leaflets were printed and distributed in 16 major cities despite perilous circumstances that made this task nearly impossible to accomplish. As a result of taking part in these activities, seven of its members were executed between February 1943 and October 1944. Sixteen were imprisoned, six acquitted, and one member escaped a last-ditch attempt to impose a death sentence in April 1945.

In an attempt to overcome the moral vacuum that seemed to have swallowed the German people, the first pamphlet of the White Rose spoke directly to a sense of shame and decency that must surely be present somewhere within the populace — even if deeply buried under layers of fear, self-deception, and obedience:

Nothing is so unworthy of a civilized nation as allowing itself to be “governed” without opposition by an irresponsible clique that has yielded to base instinct.... Who among us has any conception of the dimensions of shame that will befall us and our children when one day the veil has fallen from our eyes and the most horrible of crimes — crimes that infinitely outdistance every human measure — reach the light of day? If the German people are already so corrupted and spiritually crushed that they do not raise a hand, frivolously trusting in a questionable faith in lawful order in history; if they surrender man’s highest principle, that which raises him above all other God’s creatures, his free will; if they abandon the will to take decisive action and turn the wheel of history and thus subject it to

their own rational decision; if they are so devoid of all individuality, have already gone so far along the road toward turning into a spiritless and cowardly mass — then, yes, they deserve their downfall.

In a similar way, each subsequent pamphlet of the White Rose appealed to the sense of shame, decency, and human conscience that exists within each person and was yearning to be recognized and spoken to, and, most of all, was dying to make itself known by rebelling against the government and bringing an end to the madness. As we know, this did not happen.

Whether this unhappy result was inevitable or simply due to the fact that the White Rose was snuffed out after only nine months of activity (as other, corresponding attempts were), we will never know. But we do know this: in a nation that was choking under a cloud of surveillance, snooping, submission, and fear, the White Rose functioned as the German national conscience. At the conclusion of the fourth pamphlet distributed by the White Rose, we find the following challenge:

We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace!

I always have found this series of statements to be both compelling and instructive. In particular, the centerpiece of the triad holds a message for our times: “We are your bad conscience.” The members of the White Rose understood the need to lead by example and to create discomfort among the politically narcotized citizens of Germany by reminding them of how far they had strayed from their tradition of decent, civilized behavior.

I also am aware that several members of the White Rose were raised in the Roman Catholic tradition or had become adherents to it just before execution. One aspect of that tradition is a practice called examination of conscience. For those who are put off by references to religious practices, it may help to know that the examination of conscience probably originated in the schools of pagan philosophers.

Nonetheless, those raised in the Roman Catholic tradition are taught that one must regularly scrutinize his behavior in deed, word, thought, and omission to determine whether his actions comport with Christian teachings. The purpose is to cultivate a sense of genuine sorrow (contrition) for these shortcomings (or sins), leading to confession of the sin, followed by a request for forgiveness accompanied by a firm resolve not to repeat the sin. The point is that some members of the White Rose realized that self-examination is important and that one cannot be forgiven without first being aware of a shortcoming, confessing it, and resolving not to repeat it.

The concept of examination of conscience is important because in our everyday dealings with one another, forgiveness is often expected as if it were due automatically — even if there has been no admission of wrongdoing, no sorrow expressed, and no future resolve declared. In politics, this is doubly the case. For example, other than those rare instances in which a politician

is caught red-handed in a crime and cannot avoid the consequences, when did you last hear that a politician openly admitted that a policy was morally wrong from its inception and that he is sorry for supporting it and will not repeat it? Instead and at best, we hear only that the execution of a policy was flawed, that a strategy needed adjustment, that the tactics did not fit the policy, that there were insufficient resources to succeed, or that a policy was not supported strongly enough by the American people — probably because these poor, benighted folk were too dim to understand the miraculous nature of the “cure” that had been laid at their feet in their behalf.

Our duty to speak out

Does this sound at all like the interventionist, hate-producing, and incredibly expensive U.S. foreign policy of the past 60 years or more? Does it sound like the covert actions of the CIA in Africa, Central America, and Asia? Does it sound like Vietnam? Does it sound like Iraq or U.S. policy toward Palestine or Cuba or Korea?

Have you noticed that today’s politicians are careful — even desperately careful — never to consider, much less acknowledge in public, the possibility that U.S. foreign policy is the root cause of the terrorism that they claim to fear or that it has led to the increasingly severe and frequent incursions on our domestic liberties? No. There will be no discussion of the fundamental tenets of U.S. foreign policy. It has been our policy as long as we can remember, and it is beyond question.

Just as bad, members of the mainstream media — who understand the power wielded by politicians and bureaucrats through the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the professional consequences of being “frozen out” of access to political decision-makers — can be counted on to police the blanket of silence that surrounds this most vital point. They help to maintain the pretense of political infallibility by busying themselves with talk of strategies, tactics, and levels of support — content to dance around the edges of a gaping chasm. They never address first principles. They never dare to consider the possibility that U.S. foreign policy is wrong at its very core. They never engage in the prospect that they should examine their conscience regarding this policy, identify a wrong, admit guilt, express contrition, and then apologize to their victims — with a vow to avoid such practices in the future. No. They go along with the fiction that something as all-encompassing as U.S. foreign policy cannot possibly be wrong-headed in its very foundations.

It is this orchestrated silence about principles that genuine advocates of liberty must oppose and consistently attack — just as the members of the White Rose did. It is our task to remind those around us that all the empty talk about tactics and strategies is a mere distraction. It keeps us from addressing the root causes of social, economic, and international disruption — government coercion regardless of its particular manifestation in war, economic, or lifestyle interventions.

Currently this approach separates genuine libertarians from both pro-war conservatives and their ersatz opponents in the progressive movement. It separates us from conservatives because it reminds them that they have betrayed their claim to oppose big-government collectivism — of which war is the ultimate and most deadly expression. It separates us from progressives because it exposes their hypocrisy in supporting Iraq-like interventions in the Balkans and Darfur in addition to coercive domestic policies that victimize their fellow citizens.

With our opposition to the unprovoked invasion of Iraq and the devastation and occupation of Afghanistan, to the parade of lies offered as excuses by the administration, to the mushrooming surveillance of American citizens, to the repulsive practice of torture and its subsequent legalization by Congress and acceptance by Americans, to the illegal kidnapping and imprisonment of thousands of people without charges, to the unending fear-mongering on the part of the administration, and to the destruction of fundamental legal principles such as the right to a jury trial, we libertarians are America's "bad conscience."

Our consistent opposition to coercion also is a reminder that progressive support of big government over the decades has, in fact, made the devastation of Iraq inevitable. After all, when you deliver power into the hands of politicians, you cannot hide from their misuse of it. Do progressives think they are somehow exempt from Lord Acton's warning that "power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely"?

Fearing ideas on liberty

And that brings us back to the White Rose and their claim: We are your bad conscience. During my recent visit to the White Rose exhibition at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, where Hans and Sophie Scholl were arrested after dropping copies of the sixth leaflet from the balcony in the atrium, it was easy to obtain facsimiles of the original leaflets. It was a rare treat to read them and purchase copies.

In their time, the members of the White Rose — as few as they were — created a disturbance of conscience that the authorities genuinely feared. Ideas are important, and the response of the Nazi government bears testimony to the importance of ideas and the fear that they can generate among lawless government officials and their followers.

To remove the threat posed by the ideas of the White Rose, the Nazi authorities went to extraordinary lengths to silence its members without delay. Within four days of capture, they were executed. According to prisoners who met these first captives, the usual practice was to defer execution for 99 days. In the case of the White Rose, however, the government was so afraid of their message that execution was almost immediate — following a kangaroo-court trial that resembles the kind of "justice" that pro-government talk-radio hosts are now urging with respect to the illegally held detainees at Guantanamo and the network of secret prisons where detainees are being tortured by employees of the U.S. government.

A warning for us

In the story of the White Rose, there is a stern warning for us: democracy is not an end in itself. Further, it cannot even be considered an optimal solution for making political decisions — certainly not after the Nazi debacle and not after what has taken place as the United States has been transformed from a constitutional republic with limited powers into a war-mongering welfare-warfare democracy with no limits on its ability to interfere in the lives of U.S. citizens and people around the world. After all, Nazism was not imposed on the German people. It can even be considered the finest fruit of democracy. When a significant portion of the populace can be frightened and propagandized into agreement with barbarism, democracy will reflect and serve even the vilest political program. In fact, democracy is capable of embracing as much violence, suspicion, fear, envy, greed, hatred, and self-righteousness as the unprincipled “common man” is capable of accepting.

Today, when we remind our fellow citizens that war, mass-murder, spying, torture, kidnapping, imprisonment without trial, persecution of immigrants, taxes, compulsory indoctrination in public schools, welfare dependency, censorship, and waging war on pathetic drug addicts are intrinsically evil practices and that they produce negative consequences that are worse than the problems they seek to correct, we are playing a role that is similar to that of the White Rose. We are acting as the conscience of a nation that has run amok. We are making our fellow citizens uncomfortable with the devil’s bargain that they have struck with our government, and we are hoping that the discomfort we create will lead them to examine their conscience and change their behavior. To once again quote our friends from the White Rose: We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience. We will not leave you in peace!

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