



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

The Price of Freedom?

by Christine Smith

What is it to be born free and not to live free?

— Henry David Thoreau, “Life Without Principle”

“Freedom is not free” is a common phrase found in songs, in speeches, and on ribbons, and it’s the inscription inlaid where the walls of the Korean War Veterans Memorial join. For many Americans, the words evoke an emotional response, a silent agreement, a nodding of the head. Most people feel to do otherwise would be disrespectful and would take for granted all those Americans who gave their lives for our freedom.

I recently read a large number of essays written between 2003 and 2008 by teenagers across the country. The students’ papers repeatedly expressed the idea that freedom is not free and that taxes are good because they pay for the military. A few mentioned that the Japanese “began” World War II by attacking Pearl Harbor. (No mention was made of Roosevelt’s violations of the Constitution or the economic provocations of Japan.) Others emphasized democracy and voting and correlated being an American with supporting the government and obeying the laws. Some mentioned the attack on 9/11 as being due to terrorists’ hating America’s freedom, while others expressed gratitude for those in the military who were risking their lives to “protect us from terrorists.” “Going to war” was always equated with “protecting” or “defending” Americans’ freedom.

The consensus of these young people was that others have paid with their lives for their freedom, that every war since the inception of the United States has been fought to keep that freedom for them, and that it is their responsibility to be proudly willing to do the same.

The common thread in all the essays: Being an American means sacrifice.

But does it?

In less than three years during the Korean War, some 54,246 Americans died, with an additional 103,284 wounded. Harry Truman sent them to fight in a conflict without the

constitutionally required declaration of war from Congress. Fighting against the spread of communism, Americans are told, they died defending their country's freedom. But did they really die repelling an attack against America? Were Americans' freedoms threatened by North Korea?

And what did the more than 58,000 American men and women who died in the Vietnam War lose their lives for? Americans and their Congress were told by Lyndon Johnson that a resolution was needed "expressing the unity and determination of the United States in supporting freedom and in protecting peace in Southeast Asia," that it was a "struggle for freedom on every front of human activity," and "that the United States will continue in its basic policy of assisting the free nations of the area to defend their freedom. As I have repeatedly made clear ... the United States seeks no wider war." Americans were even told, falsely, they were the ones who had been attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Personal sacrifice is noble and righteous when it is made without coercion to a cause that is true and because one is being loyal only to his conscience. The sacrifice of American lives and resources has rarely served such a cause.

The conflict in Southeast Asia posed no threat to the liberty and lives of Americans in the United States, yet because of government lies, charades, manipulation, and force, military men and women died, as they have in interventions in other countries since then, including Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, and, of course, Iraq. And what of the tens of thousands more U.S. troops Barack Obama is sending to fight his "Af-Pak" war? Is American freedom being defended in Afghanistan or Pakistan?

A gift, not a debt

This country will remain at war and in its own brand of enslavement as long as Americans continue to equate "freedom" with "sacrifice" for the state. To erroneously believe a person is born laden with a sort of quid pro quo between himself and the state is dangerous.

Freedom doesn't come with a debt. It is a gift bestowed at birth, and like any true gift there are no strings attached.

There are no more stirring words to the hearts of Americans than those from their Declaration of Independence: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness — That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed...."

So why does generation after generation accept the false premise of owing a debt for its natural rights and liberties, when no such obligation exists? Why do so many feel unpatriotic and undeserving of freedom unless they unquestioningly support the state?

As the student essays illustrate, suppression of critical thinking and insight begins early. Government doesn't like independent thought, so it instills its doctrine of enslavement through

the 12 years of public schooling most Americans undergo. Once the natural individuality and incessant questioning of a child become replaced with a desire to conform, the predominant, socially accepted ideas become ingrained as if they were his own. His ability to challenge the collective remains, but his will to do it becomes weak.

When questioning what everyone else accepts becomes painful, people easily surrender freedom and relinquish their liberties in service to the federal government, all the while feeling their actions to be genuine expressions of respect and gratitude to their nation. The “Our country, right or wrong!” sentiment takes over. Under such indoctrination, conscience is tossed in favor of collectivism and nationalism.

Erich Fromm writes in *Escape from Freedom*, “True sacrifice presupposes an uncompromising wish for spiritual integrity. The sacrifice of those who have lost it only covers up their moral bankruptcy.”

This compromising of one’s morality permits a person to tolerate abhorrent, cruel behaviors he would previously have rejected, such as accepting civilians as expendable targets or torture. Once a person loses his integrity, anything becomes possible, even laying down his life for worthless causes. That is not freedom, but those who accept it, think it is.

Reigniting the love of liberty

As Leonard E. Read wrote in *Elements of Libertarian Leadership*, free tigers that have been captured and caged for years forget “the freedom they once had and, forgetting, they have nothing against which to contrast their existing condition. Their confinement becomes their normalcy.”

People are like those tigers. Once they accept and comply with restraints on their liberty, they no longer view the restraints as an affront to their freedom.

This is good news! It means the love of freedom, though dormant, still lies within every person. It can be reignited. To liberate minds and hearts requires an appeal to the conscience. It means libertarians must be diligent in activities that will activate that youthful inherent understanding of freedom which is now buried deep within their minds. To awaken those who have succumbed to such fallacies calls for strength in sharing rousing, challenging ideas that stimulate the independence of the individual and the love of freedom.

Freedom, like any valuable gift, certainly must be defended from those who wish to take it. The battle for the hearts and minds of the American people requires every libertarian’s participation. We must desire freedom more than anything else. Like the air we breathe and the food we eat and the water we drink, it is a necessity of life, for without it we merely exist.

By consistently opposing tyranny within our own country, no matter which way the state is trying to accomplish it, we show the government for what it is — the greatest threat to people’s freedom. This fact alone, once recognized, ends the exploitation, because the cage walls crumble and the tigers are free again.

No longer will they, in blind obedience, sacrifice their money, time, and lives to the state. They will courageously reclaim and achieve the freedom that once belonged to their ancestors but that was later surrendered. Moreover, they will guard and defend their liberties against the sole entity capable of taking them: the state.

All it takes is for the false premise to be challenged in a way that leads each one to return to his original self and natural understanding of those fundamental principles of freedom upon which the nation was founded. It requires knowledge. As people are reminded of the rights they were created with, they realize they owe no man for them. They start to question the role of government. When the love of freedom becomes stronger than fear, there is no stopping such people. Seeing through exploitative platitudes such as “Freedom isn’t free,” they realize that there is no foreign power trying to take away that freedom, but that there is a high cost to foreign intervention and the freedom it undermines. Rather than being freer for all that previous sacrifice, they see they are less so. I know this realization of the truth is possible, no matter how entrenched, because I, and most other libertarians, have experienced it.

It happens when one realizes, “He is free who lives as he wishes to live; who is neither subject to compulsion nor to hindrance, nor to force; whose movements to action are not impeded, whose desires attain their purpose, and who does not fall into that which he would avoid,” as Epictetus pointed out in *The Discourses*.

Once liberated, rather than settle for an illusory freedom people begin to live the virtues that come with genuine freedom, enabling them to create a society of liberty, peace, prosperity, and happiness. Awakened, America will again become as John Quincy Adams described it — “the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all [and] champion and vindicator only of her own.”

Christine Smith is a writer from Colorado. You may visit her website, www.ChristineSmith.us.

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