

NORTH COAST



TIMES EAGLE

DECEMBER 2001

In a dark time the eye begins to see
~Theodore Roethke

VOL 23 NO 4 50CENTS



BASCOVE

WHEN PATRIOTS ARE ENEMIES

Monthly, Caesar commemorates the Founding of the City.
Hourly, the dissolution of the Republic.

~ROMAN GRAFFITTI

Dr. Samuel Johnson is famous for his witticisms (such as "Nothing so concentrates a man's mind than knowing he will be hanged in the morning"), but one he is most noted for, that "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel," has many critics — among them Ambrose Bierce who said that although he did not wish to contradict Dr. Johnson, he felt patriotism to be a scoundrel's *first* refuge.

An enduring measure of patriotism is to not ask uncomfortable questions of leaders who usually equate such inquiries as unpatriotic: unquestioning support and obedience are usually regarded as high-level patriotism.

This type of patriotism is currently being urged upon the American people in wake of September 11, a date that probably registers infamy equally with the attack on Pearl Harbor 60 years ago December 7.

The U.S. government is using the "War on Terrorism" to coerce Americans into thinking it is unpatriotic to defend their political and civil liberties. Many Americans say they are willing to give up certain freedoms in a crisis — but no one should overlook or trust those who are always willing to take away all freedoms at any excuse, not temporarily as expected but permanently.

We are a democracy because it is necessary. It is not because of beneficent human nature that we have inherited a few basic rights and liberties sought by the mass of humanity for millennia. These limits on power are to curb the avaricious ambitions of many among us to prevent them from getting their hands on our political rights. Our freedoms are in essence our obligations as well — to preserve them for our descendants.

Yet the further removed we are from the intense imperatives of our ancestors for freedom and equality the more we take for granted what they fought to establish, and the greater the danger we will allow them to be taken away.

The current fervor of flagwaving patriotism implicitly disallows dissent. Dissent is harshly criticized, especially by the Attorney General who has clearly stated that dissent against the nation's military response to September 11 and suspension of Constitutional liberties is tantamount to treason by "aiding and abetting" the terrorist enemy. Yet now when even friends and neighbors criticize dissent is the essential moment to resist, to question with intelligent and vigorous skepticism the claims that curbing civil liberties is necessary to the nation's survival. This is precisely what our revolutionary ancestors had in mind when they set up our imperfect but earnest Constitution and its ten commandments of American democracy. They anticipated

critical moments of great tragedy and anxiety such as now and realized unscrupulous persons would seize the opportunity to grasp power and dismantle the Constitution.

The unelected President and his hard-right administration of corporate Tories are quite probably the people our ancestors warned us against and tried to prevent their usurpation of power with Constitutional government and separation of powers — as well as the series of initial addendums known as the Bill of Rights which clearly and concisely spell out the rights and obligations of the people.

President(-Select) Bush and his agents might have been, if not harmless at least containable in peacetime, but now war has set them loose on the Constitution and they are perhaps the greatest danger this country faces, much more than the terrorism they exploit as a shield and *raison d'être* for annulling the very freedoms they shamelessly pretend to protect.

The issue is not whether the American people think it is a good idea to deny or abrogate certain civil liberties but whether the President can bypass Congress and dramatically alter our legal system by himself — the unilateral dismemberment of civil liberties and Presidential assault on due process and Constitutional law in general.

We are a democracy yet we know little about democracy. Sovereignty, independence and equal rights do not come easily and never stay very long without constant feeding and nurturing. It took a long time for people to be convinced of the possibility of freedom, even though our predecessors inherited a powerful but thwarted tradition of rights and liberties. Our own Revolution was in fact the result of bitter disappointment the mother country did not recognize the loyalty to ancient principles its colonies in North America felt they had exhibited in resisting what they considered illegal and proscriptive edicts intolerable to honest and loyal subjects.

We have evolved to world supremacy in two centuries since the Revolution, which has been the ambition all along despite fearful and protective tendencies toward isolation. A history of the USA is not entirely an evolution of democracy but more essentially its rise as a superpower.

As a nation that holds as its centerpiece distrust of militarily inspired governance (even the conservative NRA rants that only citizens' rifles stand between tyranny and freedom), the U.S. has consistently turned to military solutions to resolve its problems and realize its ambitions. Despite its own demonstrated ruthlessness in world affairs, the U.S. hasn't been quite as bad as some (Hitler & Stalin; Serbia & Rwanda), yet to those it has attempted to yoke it is bad enough. U.S. ambitions have killed or abandoned to political bondage millions of people whose only offense has been to be in the way of superpower supremacy. Peasant soldiers forced to arms to protect puppet regimes against domestic reform and insurrection; whole populations

caught in the thrasher of abstract power that is gained at the expense of their expendability.

Yet democracy incites ever increasing numbers despite the brutal response of American puppets, and despite its own callous repression of libertarian movements covertly or overtly, the U.S. is often the model of independence sought by indigenous rebels. If the U.S. really intends to democratize the world it must first quit exploiting and treating as less than equal the people who live in other places. That would require acting as if Americans really do believe in democracy.

We have been sleepwalking through history the past few decades, filling our pockets and amusing ourselves to death while much of the rest of the world burned in sweeping cycles of poverty and tragedy, often by the heavy hand of our superpower mandates that have allowed us an artificially inflated lifestyle we rather arrogantly call the American Way of Life.

The USA probably should, as so many suggest, refresh itself in this dark period of crisis and uncertainty with a fresh infusion of original principles, but these are difficult to pin down and incredibly problematic to apply to an evolving millennial society. U.S. Supreme Court nominee Bork lost his chance as a Justice some years back because of his insistence he would adhere to what he called the original intent of the Constitution: in other words, the rule of propertied white men. The Bill of Rights and subsequent amendments clarify that original intent was not as restricted as Bork and other so-called strict reconstructionists claim, but instead as originally constructed an amendable document able to reflect and serve a continually changing civilization despite the hardships, frustrations and bloodshed that accompanies the amending process. The original framers had at least the foresight to recognize that the interests and problems of succeeding generations would most certainly be different than their own.

The endless circle of individual rights and obligations melding within collective necessities is distinctly at play in this period of trauma and crisis. It is a time to confront and attempt to comprehend at their core the most cherished vanities, the theories, philosophies and moral roots of our civilization at their most vulnerable levels, in particular the faltering myth that the wishes of the citizens could turn the government around.

And it must always be remembered that our first patriots were traitors and terrorists relentlessly in revolt for freedom.

What is freedom?

The right to not be recognized by gender, race or class but by the simple fact of a person's existence on the planet.

The right to be counted on and respected for personal and independent expression of belief and opinion.

The right to be the only person on the planet who believes in something no one else does.

~MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER