

disagree: which is not to say the ideals of liberty and justice for all are not articulate in the nation or that their intent is less than political and personal freedom (and something akin to equality under the law however discriminatory its actual practice) for everybody now and in the future who live within its geospace.

The persistent conundrum is that the actuality is far less than advertised — that neither freedom nor equity is the daily reality for millions of Americans who are governed instead as if they live in a police state because they are poor or are a minority race; that the old devils of worth measured by wealth, gender and race continually and perversely undercut the foundations the nation claims to stand upon and believe in.

The assumption of freedom is that the average human being is intelligent and inspired by compassion and that most people will think and act reasonably most of the time. The usual assumption of government is that the common citizenry is lazy, unintelligent, primitive and brutal and must be shielded from its own perfidious nature. The tendency of government is to rule and it is a parasite. Government must by implication or force of its sovereignty feed upon and subtract the political liberties, rights and powers of those it rules.

Our ancestors who wrote the Constitution knew very well that governments swallow the rights of their citizenry and that the natural inclination of authority is to concentrate and perpetuate its power by any means. Reflexively government subverts the rights of all but its ruling classes, even if a system originated to provide rights to the governed. The laws of the Constitution simply make it more difficult for the leaders of government to expropriate complete power.

It is the responsibility of a democratic people to contain the power of their government, which without that restraint will relentlessly take power away from the people. In the past century the U.S. government has usurped much power to itself, some of it for the betterment of the people such as civil rights laws, but also much of it against the people epitomized by the half century rule of terror, secrecy and doubt that characterized the Cold War and nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union.

The political freedom and power of the common citizenry has been made the law of this nation to protect democracy from predatory or cruel government. Yet a government of the people is assumed to also be a government for the people, so it is entrusted to act in the people's behalf to prevent or correct the excesses of monopolistic and unprincipled private interests, which is in contrast to the current era of virulent capitalism abetted by the government. Neoconservatives are wrong when they claim that a free government must be free from government. The dismantling of government protections which has accelerated since the Reagan/Bush administration two decades ago alters government's role from acting as benefactor and protector of civil rights and liberties to its more ominous nature of guardian and enforcer of the reigning status quo, which is rancorously articulated by the wealthy elite and religious right.

Freedom implies a mature citizenry while the nature of authority requires that no one grow up. To be free and remain that way is a large responsibility and many people don't want it. Political freedom insists upon the value of the individual but the accelerated complexity of American society is constructed on aggregates and consensus and makes the contributions and usefulness of each of us less valuable. Our thinking and sense of self-worth are crucially affected. An individual and ultimately collective sense of personal and political helplessness sets in.

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. The newly reconstructed Federalists of the current Presidential administration share a constrained interpretation of the Constitution: its rights and privileges belong to the wealthy and privileged, its dues and obligations to everyone else. They would like to suspend the Bill of Rights and believe in what they call the 'original intent' of the framers of the Constitution — the rule of propertied white men. The Bill of Rights and subsequent amendments clarify that original intent of the Constitution was not as restricted as the so-called strict reconstructionists claim, but instead it is an amendable document able to reflect and serve a continually changing civilization despite hardships, frustrations and bloodshed that accompany the amending process. The actual intent of the original framers was to make the Constitution broad enough to reflect future problems and ideas they knew they were unable to anticipate or too contemporarily divided in opinion to immediately resolve, among them the movements to emancipate slaves and women.

James Madison argued in 1791 when he introduced the Bill of Rights to the Constitution that "the people, not the government, possess the absolute sovereignty."

Abraham Lincoln said that if the people retain their virtue and vigilance, no administration, "by any extreme of wickedness or folly," can seriously injure the governmental concepts of our founding ancestors, whom it should not be forgotten were traitors and terrorists relentlessly in revolt for freedom.

And as James Boyle wrote in *The New York Times* a few years ago, "One reason we have a democracy is because people make unspeakably stupid decisions without it."

9/11 precipitated a crisis of democracy that might well be more momentous and more prolonged than the war on terrorism. Civil liberties are dramatically threatened and average citizens have little say about it. Ordinary people are rendered



## SMILING MAN

The man was smiling. It was the 4th of July. Somewhere else small children were parading in patriotic costumes under American flags.

The man's face was proud and his smile was gentle. *Look! He must be Thomas Jefferson!* People pointed at a small boy with a powdered wig askew, who laughed shyly at their attention. *And that must be George Washington — that little girl just has to be Betsy Ross.*

Perhaps his smile was sad. The crowd laughed at another boy who was Abraham Lincoln trying to keep his whiskers from falling. Mothers and fathers affectionately waved to their children parading by.

His friends were not smiling. Great brass bands followed the marching children, crescendoing the air with stirring American songs, the sun shining molten gold on trumpets and bassoons.

The smiling man and his friends did not move. Behind the bands came the veterans, marching to the drums, wearing blue American Legion or VFW caps, some of them with empty sleeves pinned to their shoulders; others stumped by on artificial legs.

There were four of them, counting the smiling man, and they lay on the wet ground of a coconut grove. In the afternoon, after the picnic lunch, some of the men and boys played baseball on the local park diamond while politicians swore their undying patriotism to the crowd sitting on the grass. They threw out such catchwords as "Liberty" and "Freedom for all" as if they were baseballs.

Above his sad smile and wide open eyes, the smiling man's head was neatly cut away, the round lower half almost resembling a child's cereal bowl. His friends laying on the moldy ground had parts of their bodies missing also. A veteran without

an arm, who did not wear an American Legion or VFW cap, attempted to shout down the politicians, calling them "Liars!" and "Murderers!" He remembered the smiling man and his friends, would in fact never forget them, although in the course of almost a year at war he had seen thousands of dead, most of them farmers and their families whose bodies were strewn like rubbish around their burned homes or out in their rice fields. The loss of his arm seemed almost a justifiable penance, but he was more often bitter about it.

He remembered walking over to the bodies in the coconut grove. He had killed them the night before. He had seen them by the light of a flare trying to set up a machinegun and blew them apart with a hand grenade. It had rained the rest of the night and in the morning the bodies lay leached of blood. The smiling man stared at him with dead eyes. He was transfixed by the smile, the neatly cut away head resembling one of those cornflakes bowls with a comic face his mother had given him when he was a boy. A friend shook him out of it and he walked away into the months ahead until the war took his arm.

Police took his arm and led him away, warning him to not disturb the festivities again or they would lock him up. The smiling man and his friends were left to rot in the grove. The sun set behind tall mountains and night crept over the bodies. Somewhere else great colored starbursts flared in the sky, showering the thrilled crowds with streamers of flaming oranges, reds and yellows. One magnificent burst formed the Stars & Stripes for a few seconds and everyone applauded. Elsewhere on this night heavy jet bombers shot into a tropical sky and turned toward a jungled coconut grove.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

impotent. Most are at the bottom of the crisis and are affected every day by the consequences. The country is at war, initiated by lies and illegal assumptions of power. Social services are withdrawn as well as public health because tax money is being diverted toward war, and of course to the corporations of the military/industrial mafia that unabashedly profit from making war possible and continuous. The USA Patriot Act that was cobbled together with hardly a whimper of protest by Congress in the wake of 9/11 circumvents and erodes Constitutional rights and liberties.

The accelerated movement to *nouveau* Federalism since 9/11 shows up in five critical areas: diminished freedoms of press and speech; imposition of religion into affairs of state; increased suppression of civil rights of women, racial minorities and the poor (and consequently everybody else); curtailed judicial rights synchronous with rising police powers; and continued trickle-down and flood-up of the nation's wealth. The President tells the country it will only have peace and security through war. Dissent is inhibited, treated as unpatriotic and possibly a form of terrorism. Huey Long said, "Fascism will come to the United States wrapped in the American flag."

The essential issue is whether we are going to uphold what our ancestors started or if we are going to undo nearly two and a half centuries of hardwon and often bloody struggles for

liberty and give it all away to a powerful clique of ambitious imperialists who manipulate our history as well as our passions and fears. The paradox is that our Bill of Rights are not for us alone, nor is the manifest destiny our leaders wish to export in a rather twisted and malevolent, entirely self-serving vision.

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

Bewildered, exhausted and despaired by the cold realities and complexities of modern government and its unholy alliance with corporate avarice and military force, perhaps we should adhere to parsimony instead of surrender; patiently trace the confused, corrupt tentacles to their origins, and from that basic point, realize how we got off the track of the history we intended to navigate when our ancestors declared they could no longer abide the oppression of a king.

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.



**NORTH COAST  
TIMES EAGLE**  
A JOURNAL OF ART & OPINION  
PUBLISHED IN ASTORIA, OREGON  
757 27TH STREET 97103  
MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER  
EDITOR & PUBLISHER

**BILL'S TAVERN  
BREW HOUSE**  
Cannon Beach, Oregon