Faith of Our Fathers

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"I will not allow violence against this house," stated Dustin Hoffman’s character in the original "Straw Dogs" (1971), a graphic film that is still worth watching, but only by adults. Most will watch Sam Peckinpah’s psychological thriller with some Western themes only once. For many, some quick editing via the remote will be required. The central point of the movie is still valid.

Civilized men once had a universal understanding that a man’s home was his castle. Why?

The idea that a man’s, or now in many cases a woman’s, house and property should be within their own control is on life support. It once was a cultural norm. The goal in America was for the regular guy – in colonial days, the former European peasant – to have the same rights and controls over his own property as did the King of England over his. Within his home, each homeowner was to be King.

The 4th Amendment requiring a warrant to issue only on probable cause and other constitutional provisions such as prohibiting the forced housing of troops in private residences during peacetime are examples of the weight the founders placed on the common man’s right to control his private property. The 2nd Amendment, of course, partly exists to help the regular guy protect those and other rights. Although the universal recognition of women’s and minorities’ rights to secure property came later, the recognition of their rights was clearly consistent with the intent of the founders’ original language.

We call it the American Revolution, but in reality it was counter-revolution. The rights that are acknowledged, not granted, in our constitution were rights that had at various times been asserted in England. The King and his lackeys, in colonial days, overstepped their bounds in the Americas. Traditional rights were reasserted by our founding fathers by bullet and sword.

That took courage, but what was its basis, its foundation?

Appropriately during the Watergate hearings, a conservative Southern Democrat (unfortunately such a creature is a relic of a bygone era), Senator Sam Ervin, quoted Englishman William Pitt the elder to one of Nixon’s rabid yes men. "The poorest man may in his cottage bid defiance to all the force of the Crown. It may be frail; its roof may shake; the wind may blow through it; the storms may enter, the rain may enter, but the King of England cannot enter."

In other words, even the President has a limitation on his powers by design. Unfortunately, we have eroded that design.

A review of an early copy of a Webster’s dictionary is instructive. My copy dates from the late 1830s. Under the word "allodial," it refers to allodial title. By way of definition, Webster asserts the expectation that in America we own our lands outright and free from taxes, for instance, like a King. That no longer exists here, but at one time it was the norm in America; real property, land, was not taxed. In America, at one time, the tax man could not force you off your property.

From taxation to lack of control. Should you really expect to be secure in your own household from warrantless searches as expressly stated in the 4th Amendment? Not really; we have steadily eroded that constitutional right through gutless court rulings by gutless judges who have put legislated statutes ahead of what is supposed to be the highest law of the land. Our legislators and judges, a majority of them, have chosen to put security as they see it before liberty and law. Most are unworthy of office but still are acceptable to a dumbed-down peasantized voting public.

We are a people who have lost our own faith. We once shared a faith with backbone, regardless of the imperfections of individuals. It sustained Americans of principle from George Washington to Martin Luther King. In presidents it was last spotted, at least a splash of it, in Reagan. I once told a class full of teenagers that courage was faith in action. It was one of my better moments.

Faith is no longer is evident in most of the moral invertebrates left and right that presume to govern – unless it is being used cynically – on those that elect them. It is largely missing from our churches. It has been the foundation of free republics from Switzerland to the United States; however, we now run from any obligation to higher laws, be they the constitution or any concept of a Divine obligation.

As a society we disparage imperfection, but we forget the faith that sustains all of us who are flawed. When it comes to our heritage and the blessings of our form of government, we turn our flaws and fears into pretend virtues. We run from things that are the best in mankind, and we run from courage itself. At the local level of government, we often even lack the courage to economize during tough times, like households are forced to. In these times, even local and county leaders act more like the colonial-era King of England than trustees of the public’s money.

Sam Ervin, a descendant of Scottish Calvinists like many of us in this country and particularly the South, may have made that point best: "Faith is not a storm cellar to which men and women can flee for refuge from the storms of life. It is, instead, an inner force that gives them the strength to face those storms and their consequences with serenity of spirit."

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