

Building a Culture of Freedom:

While Fighting Assaults on Civil Liberties, Let's Understand the Conditions that Left Them Vulnerable



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RESOURCES

Bill of Rights Defense Committee www.bordc.org

National Lawyers Guild
www.NLG.org

The Constitution Society
www.Constitution.org

American Civil Liberties Union www.PFAW.org

See our Civil Rights web page for links to more resources and articles

"Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

--Benjamin Franklin, 1755

ReclaimDemocracy.org is a non-profit (501c3) educational organization working to inspire citizens to revoke illegitimate corporate power and revive grassroots democracy.

By Jeff Milchen © 2001
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At a celebration last July 4th I picked up a pocket copy of the U.S. Constitution imprinted with the slogan "Revolution bought us our freedom, but the Constitution let us keep it." At first it seemed like a nice patriotic sentiment, but recent events have awakened me to recognize it as a dangerous falsehood. After all, the 15th Amendment formally gave voting rights to blacks in 1870, but that didn't go far on election days--it would be nearly a century until the promise was fulfilled. Without our awareness and vigilant defense of freedoms, the Constitution is no more than discolored paper.

Americans' failure to counter encroachments on our civil rights by the Bush administration and Congress dismays many citizens. It's easy to blame fear of further terrorism, but the ease with which Americans cede liberty in the name of safety represents a more deeply-rooted problem--national ignorance of our own civil rights history. Perhaps we don't defend our own Constitutional rights aggressively because we don't appreciate their origin and importance.

Supporting this theory is an earlier poll--an annual undertaking of Vanderbilt University's Freedom Forum gauging citizen knowledge and attitudes toward the First Amendment. In 2001, 39 percent of respondents agreed (most of them "strongly") that "The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees," suggesting almost four in 10 people believe we enjoy too much freedom of expression. That number rose dramatically from previous years.

But this is just reaction to September 11; we're still freedom-loving people, right? Sorry, the poll was taken five months prior.

Chillingly, the poll also found 23 percent of respondents disagreed that "newspapers should be able to publish freely without government approval of a story" and only 57 percent agreed strongly that papers "should be allowed to criticize public officials."

Disrespect for the Constitution is a perpetual threat, not a new phenomenon. When President Clinton alarmingly stated "The United States can't be so fixed on our desire to preserve the rights of ordinary Americans" in 1993, barely a murmur resonated in response.

Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy warns, "The Constitution needs renewal and understanding each generation, or it's not going to last." Key to such understanding is recognizing that early Americans had fresh memories of dissent's oppression in England and resisted establishing a central government powerful enough to curb freedom. The Constitution was ratified only because Congress promised to add guarantees of liberty--the Bill of Rights--in a permanent contract between citizens and their government.

Yet today we allow these rights to be treated as privileges that Congress or White House officials may choose to ignore or revoke. Our founders would be apoplectic to witness our Attorney General accuse civil rights defenders of "aiding terrorists." Yet no Congressperson or major newspaper has called for his removal.

Ashcroft derided critics as employing "phantoms of lost liberty" while he unconstitutionally holds hundreds in prison without charges (the Bill of Rights makes no exceptions for non-citizens). If we passively let it happen to "them," we will richly deserve losing our own freedom. Generations of Americans in the military and social justice movements fought and died for rights we enjoy today, but our Constitution still is not self-enforcing.

So how can we who value civil rights counter infringement on our hard-won freedoms? There's no quick fix. We must rally to stop further encroachments, but we also need to sow seeds for future liberty by passing forgotten values to our children and reinvigorate a culture of freedom. We should strive to engage our young people in civics, facilitate their understanding beyond memorization of historical facts, and promote a sense of patriotism involving loyalty to our Constitutional principles, not blind obedience to power.

While dangerous laws like the "Patriot Act" already passed, reason for hope exists. Remember that serious attacks on liberties succeeded many times in our past, including during each major war.

Yet each time rights were curtailed, we struggled successfully to reclaim those rights--and progressed further. We can and must do it again. But while we work to restore freedoms lost, let's ensure future generations need not repeat our defensive struggle, but instead can progress further still toward a nation of liberty and justice for all.