

THE AMERICAN TRADITION

By Bruce Catton

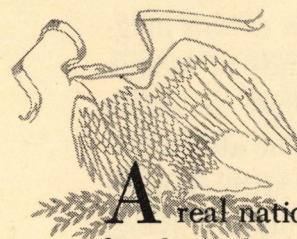


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a speech by Bruce Catton

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A real national tradition is something that we live by rather than something that we talk about. We seldom try to define it; we feel that we don't have to, because if it is a real, living, moving force — and it is, if it is a genuine national tradition — we simply respond to it. We respond to it instinctively, because it is so deeply a part of our lives that it has us in its possession.

The greatest of all American traditions is the simple tradition of freedom. From our earliest days as a people, this tradition has provided us with a faith to live by. It has shaped what Americans have done and what they have dreamed. If any one word tells what America really is, it is that one word — freedom.

This is a word that is eternally growing broader. If any single thing gives us reason to have confidence in the infinite future of the American people it is the fact that this most basic of our traditions is capable of infinite expansion. It does not limit us. On the contrary, it forever invites us to grow — to see beyond the horizon, to look ahead to a fairer and a brighter day, to develop and to strengthen the noble concept of brotherhood by which we live. The Fund for the Republic is founded upon this living concept of freedom —

and that is why I am proud to be a director of the Fund and to take part in this dinner tonight.

We are meeting here in the spirit of this magnificent tradition, to see how it stands in today's uncertain world, and to pay our tribute to certain present-day Americans who have done all that individuals could do, with faith and with courage and with devotion, to keep the tradition a living, breathing force in American life.

I think we shall discover, as we proceed with our examination of these cases, that this national tradition of ours is as strong and as healthy as it ever was. Today, as always in the past, its best and strongest defense lies in the reactions which individual Americans make when they find the tradition under attack. The tradition may be a national thing, but it resides finally in the hearts of individual men and women. These men and women do not always bother to work out elaborate rationalizations of their acts of defense. They simply respond instinctively to specific cases. When they encounter a situation which denies the tradition of freedom, an inner force which they do not need to define impels them to go out and do something about it; they move, without thought of what the cost to themselves may be, to put themselves in between the oppressor and the oppressed. They strengthen freedom simply by going ahead and living it.

Examples Everywhere

We find them, quite literally, everywhere. A state legislator in Florida discovers that his stand

for school integration makes him a minority of one in his legislature; no matter, he goes on as he had started, and attainment of the brotherhood of man comes one step nearer as a result. A Catholic priest in Indiana finds immigrant farm laborers suffering medieval exploitation and injustice; he refuses to walk on the other side of the road but stops to demand that the exploitation and injustice be remedied — and, after months of unremitting effort, finally sees his demand made good; and fifty or sixty human beings move out of peonage into the sunlight of American life. A handful of Protestant ministers risk their careers to stand against bigotry and intolerance in their own Tennessee town — and, after a long struggle, see the area in which bigotry and intolerance can operate perceptibly narrowed. A young Oklahoma school teacher loses his job in order to make his lone protest against racial discrimination — and telling why he had done so, gives a noble and eloquent explanation of the spirit that moves Americans who love freedom: "In a thing like this you don't stop to think. You just do what you feel you have to do."

You don't stop to think; you just do what you feel you have to do. From the earliest days, the presence of that spirit in the breasts of American men and women has been our most profound national asset. It is where this tradition really lives. Not all of the petty, malignant forces of reaction — the men who think the people need a guardian and a keeper to guide their way into a blighting conformity; the men who dread freedom unless it be

limited to folk who think and talk as they themselves would do; the men who believe that there should be classes and grades in American citizenship, and dread anything that tends to remove the barriers that set man apart from man — not all of these together, operating in a time of confusion and danger, can summon a force strong enough to beat down the simple, instinctive reaction that rises in the breast of the ordinary American when he sees American freedoms being cut down.

I used the plural — freedoms — for it appears that freedom has many forms.

We seem to have begun, in this country, with a demand for freedom of religious belief — in Plymouth colony and Providence plantation, in William Penn's settlement of Pennsylvania and in the charter for the first colonization of Maryland.

We moved on to see that freedom must also mean freedom from foreign oppression, and fought the American revolution to make that freedom good.

Then we came to see that there must also be freedom from domestic tyranny, and we put together the Constitution of the United States.

We realized also that the mind of man must be free from dominion by government, and we added to our Constitution the Bill of Rights — which is just as pertinent, and just as much needed, today as at the time when it was written.

We came, as well, to see that freedom has to be unlimited — that it has to apply all across the board, to men of all colors, all races and all conditions — and we struggled through a terrible Civil

War in order to make such an extension of freedom possible.

All of these are not separate freedoms so much as they are varying forms of an undivided whole. For one of the things we have learned in this country is that freedom has to be indivisible. Anything that limits any part of it, for anyone, is a menace to all of us, a threat to the tradition by which we live. Our American gospel applies unto the least of these, our brethren; we share all of our rights with them, and any denial of freedom, to anybody, anywhere along the line, applies ultimately to all of us.

Freedom Under Attack

American freedom today is under attack — very often, by people who insist that they are trying to defend it. In a short-range view conditions are extremely ominous; yet I think if we look at our present situation long-range we can see that we have little reason to be afraid. We get waves of reaction in this country, periodically, in times of extreme national stress, and the great national tradition comes under attack — seems, indeed, to be in a fair way to be overwhelmed entirely. But the waves always pass — with however much incidental injustice and oppression for certain individual victims — because the instinct in the American mind and heart which the tradition is based on is, finally, irrepressible.

In the early days of the Republic we had, for instance, the Alien and Sedition Acts.

Europe was torn by a great war and by an un-

predictable revolutionary movement. America's position seemed insecure; external pressures were becoming all but intolerable, and men hardly knew which way to turn to find national security. Out of this came these almost unbelievably repressive laws. Freedom of the press and freedom of speech were effectively outlawed. It was made a crime to criticize acts of the national administration. Editors who spoke out against these laws were imprisoned. Thomas Jefferson's mail was opened, in the hope that some paragraph or sentence could be found on which he could be arrested for sedition. A man who tried to get signatures to a petition to Congress urging repeal of these laws was arrested and sentenced to jail. Lawyers who defended victims of this oppression were denounced by judges as traitors. To all appearances, American freedom had been done to death.

All of this lasted two years or more. Then came a change. Jefferson himself, against whom so much of this attack had been aimed, became President. The laws expired. The freedom that had been assailed so malevolently was restored — stronger than ever for the very virulence of the onslaught that had been made upon it. Today the men who inspired and supported the Alien and Sedition Laws are remembered only because they have come to symbolize the stupidity and the viciousness of those who tried, briefly and unsuccessfully, to turn backward the main stream of American life.

Similar things have happened at other times.

During the early part of the Civil War a brigadier general in the Union army was called before a Congressional committee and questioned because of suspicion that he had been having traitorous dealings with the Confederates — his real offense being that by following the instructions of his superiors, and returning fugitive slaves to their Maryland owners, he had given offense to the powerful and suspicious Abolitionists who were rising to dominance in Congress. He was accused of nothing whatever; indeed, he never quite realized that he was even under suspicion; but he was finally removed from command and sent off to prison, by a War Department which dared not oppose a powerful Congressional committee, and his career was ruined. He was released, finally — not exactly cleared, because nobody had ever formally accused him of anything, so there was no charge from which he could be cleared — but at least released. And the episode comes down in history as a melancholy illustration of the way in which fear and hysteria, operating together, can lead even a committee of Congress to narrow the area of American freedom and justice.

I have cited two cases out of the past. There are many more that could be cited; some of them, indeed, matters of tolerably recent memory. But the thing to bear in mind is that these spasms to which we are now and then subjected are always of temporary effect. We do come out of them; their authors pass on and are forgotten, surviving only as melancholy footnotes in history; and our great tradition, down the years, grows broader and

stronger despite these temporary setbacks.

We are today emerging from the latest of these spasms of terror. We have seen more highly discouraging things in recent years. We have seen an atmosphere in which the mere fact that a man was accused of something was taken as proof of his guilt. We have been reminded of Mark Twain's comment on the reign of terror that prevailed in late medieval times under the Doges of Venice, when a committee on public safety received anonymous accusations against the loyalty of citizens; as Mark Twain remarked, if the committee could find no proof to support an accusation it usually found the accused guilty on the ground this simply showed how deep and devious and inscrutable the man's villainy really was. We have witnessed an era in which it was widely taken as a crime for an accused person to invoke the Bill of Rights itself in his own defense — as if the provisions of the Bill of Rights were not meant to operate in precisely a time like the present. We have seen times in which no one in authority seemed willing to place the slightest amount of trust in the innate loyalty, good faith and intelligence of the American people; times which led former Senator Harry Cain to burst out with the cry: "A whole clique of spies could hardly do as much damage to us as could our failure as a government to have confidence in the people."

The Wave Is Passing

We have seen all of this, and we can still see too much of it if we look around carefully. Yet the

crest of the wave is passing. It is passing because the American people are responding once more to that deepest and most profound of all of their instincts — the instinct to defend the tradition of freedom when it comes under attack.

It is passing because the courts of America have stood firmly in defense of individual liberties. It is passing because many groups and individuals have stood up for the rights of their fellow Americans.

Scientists have made a contribution by their efforts to promote rational discussion of the dangers of too much secrecy about their work. The Congressional committee headed by Representative Moss has thrown much light on the secretive practices of some government agencies. The press, through its reports on the Moss Committee's work and through the efforts of individual newspapermen, has helped to break through some of the official barriers to the free flow of information.

The American people are gradually getting the materials for a more factual understanding of communism in the United States and the world. The events in Hungary have clearly demonstrated the essential falsity of Communist claims to a concern for civil liberties — and have contributed to the decline of the communists here and in other free countries.

But when I say that the crest of the wave is passing I do not mean that no threats to liberty exist. Arbitrary censorship both by private and governmental groups has continued to affect a wide area of American life. Government restrictions on the

flow of information are still excessive in some agencies. Much confusion remains in the administration of security measures; some unfair procedures have become institutionalized. The pressures of conformity are still strong in many places.

Yet I feel confident that the American tradition will flourish in the future as it has in the past. That tradition, to repeat, is something that lives inside of us. It is not a set of laws; and freedom itself is not simply the absence of restraint. Rather, it is an abiding inner faith that cannot be limited by doubt or by confusion or by fear. It is something built into the American soul, and in the long run it is unconquerable.

The secret of the American tradition is freedom — freedom unabridged and unadulterated, freedom that applies to everybody in the land at all times and places, freedom for those with whom we disagree as well as for those with whom we do agree.

Freedom Is Courage

And the secret of freedom, in turn, is — just courage. The kind of courage, welling up instinctively in the breasts of individual citizens, which over and over again leads to the kind of actions that are commemorated in the letters which we are concerned with here this evening; the kind of courage which led the poet to cry:

*Yet, freedom, yet, thy banner, torn but flying,
Streams like the thunder cloud against the wind.*

Freedom rests on courage; and courage, in its turn, rests on faith — on faith in ourselves and

faith in our fellows, on faith that the thing which we believe in and which we live by is immortal and everlasting, a fundamental truth of the universe with which we move on toward the future. It is on this faith that our confidence finally rests. For out of this faith come those noble statements which show why this American tradition is in the end invulnerable; statements like that one of the Oklahoma school master —

“In a thing like this you don’t stop to think. You just do what you feel you have to do.”

On that spirit, and in that spirit, we can go ahead to broaden the great American tradition.

