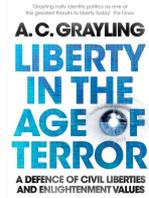




Books

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Liberty in the Age of Terror



DESPOTS have long known that it is easy to govern a cowed and fearful nation where free thought and civil liberty are forbidden. Religions have thrived without too much effort by promoting the notion that there is an all-seeing God who knows your every thought and deed, and who will punish you (after you are safely dead, of course) forever and ever, if you step out of line. The history of democracy is the history of attempts by the people to take control of their own lives from the kings and priests who have spuriously claimed to be better qualified to decide what is best for them. It took centuries of blood and toil to achieve a *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* to which governments have been obliged, at least, to pay lip service.

Those hard-won rights were never willingly conceded, and they are under stronger attack now than ever they were, and as usual, religion is at the root of it. This time, it's militant Islam whose terrorists seek to sow fear into the general population and inject division and xenophobia into the Western world, so that fearful citizens' freedoms can be withdrawn by their governments, all in the name of security. In this respect, right-wing western governments are effectively colluding with the terrorists ... and they're winning.

A.C. Grayling reminds us that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, and in his book *Liberty in the Age of Terror* (Bloomsbury, London 2009) he urges us to defend our civil liberties against our own governments. Pointing out that the primary responsibility of a government should be to protect its citizens' civil liberties, he warns against letting ourselves be frightened into accepting that the right response to Islamic terrorism is for Western governments to withdraw their citizens' liberties, and thus to create the illiberal closed societies that the terrorists want. As noted above, it also suits the political leaders to withdraw freedoms because unfree societies are easier to govern. Already, Western governments are using the threat of terrorism as an excuse to enforce surveillance, replacing God with CCTV and invading our privacies to track and arrest and hold people for long periods without charge, whilst legislating to undo freedoms that took centuries to achieve. Didn't we fight world wars to protect liberty against tyranny? The fact is that we won't appreciate our freedoms until after we've lost them, and then it'll be too late.

The claim that 'you have nothing to fear if you have nothing to hide' is easily refuted by pointing to the presumed-innocent 'detainees' in Guantanamo Bay or to the Birmingham Six or the Guildford Four. The definition of 'suspicion' is being gradually extended to suit the convenience of Big Brother – anti-terrorism legislation is now used to arrest and to detain without trial peaceful demonstrators and anti-globalisation protestors, and to eject hecklers from political meetings. Look at the treatment of 'terrorist suspects' against whom there are no charges and no evidence – 'rendition' to a foreign place where they can be insulted, tortured and imprisoned indefinitely. Even worse for 'dangerous terrorist suspects', whoever they might be. Or consider the case of the Brazilian, Charles de Menezes, who was shot dead by British police because in that country, the presumption of guilt has been reversed – Brits are now guilty until they can prove that they are innocent. James Madison observed that "The means of defence against foreign danger have become instruments of tyranny at home".

Liberty and justice should trump ill-defined 'security measures'. Individuals must be free to debate and express opinions because the alternative is what the terrorists are promoting. Benjamin Franklin observed that "those who give up freedom in order to gain security, do not have, neither do they deserve, either one".

George W Bush's so-called 'War on Terror', declared on 20 Sept 2001, is supposedly being fought to defend our freedom and democracy.... by taking away our freedom and democracy. The idea of being 'at war' justifies temporary restrictions on our civil liberties which would be unacceptable in peacetime, but just as this imaginary 'war' is unwinnable, so the temporary restrictions are actually permanent. The ongoing colour-coded yellow and orange states of alert against an undefined unseen enemy conveniently maintain the fearful psychological effect on the nation whereby frightened populations willingly accept laws that take away their freedoms – all in the name of freedom. Orwell would be in his element.

Eisenhower famously warned against the military-industrial complex, who flourish in war-time. War is in their interest, and the notion of being 'at war' with terrorism is used to suggest that terrorism can be defeated by military means, thus justifying unrelated military adventures, such as the invasion of Iraq, which was presented as a defensive action (just as the US Dept. of War had become the Dept. of Defense, and the British War Office had morphed into the Ministry of Defence). Truth is indeed the first casualty of war, real or imagined, even though we should all by now be a little war-weary, as we endure our ongoing wars on abstractions such as drugs, want, tyranny, evil and even obesity.

If a religion is mature and confident, it should not need to suppress satire or ridicule. It is a sign of weakness that Catholics, Christians and Muslims fear honest criticism and demand laws forbidding so-called 'blasphemy'. Imagine a political party demanding such privileges! The Danish cartoons did not set out to give offence – the offence was what was deliberately and provocatively taken. Grayling argues that those who choose to live in a Western liberal democracy must understand that, although discrimination by age, ethnicity, sex, sexuality – the things they cannot choose – will not be tolerated by Western law, their voluntarily-held opinions and beliefs in matters of ideology, religion and politics are open season for cartoonists, satirists and those who hold contrary views. If they can't accept this, then they are free to leave. Because tolerance, if it is to survive, cannot extend to tolerance of an intolerant ideology that seeks to impose belief by means other than argument. If such religious ideologies are allowed to dominate, women will become second-class citizens, and science, education and the law will be suppressed whenever they conflict with the orthodoxy of the dominant belief. Intellectual and social progress will be doomed.

Above all, we must be eternally vigilant in our defence of freedom of speech – otherwise we will have no means to protect it when it is taken away, for without free speech, there can be no freedom at all (though in fairness, free speech is not 'free', insofar as it carries reasonable obligations). In the Republic, however, our Blasphemy law lies dormant, ready to be invoked at any time to criminalise anyone who dares to criticise someone's religious beliefs. Bear in mind that different religions are mutually hostile, exclusive and blaspheming, so it is clear that it is not just atheists and humanists who are at risk. Bear in mind also that, in Grayling's words, "The blogosphere is the biggest toilet wall in the universe", and it isn't difficult to find something offensive on it.

Patriotism, racism and militarism have blighted the last two centuries, and unless we are very careful, our governments, prompted by Saudi-funded Wahhabism, will blight the next, in their war on free speech and those of our basic human rights which don't happen to suit Wahhabist dogma. But it's not simply a matter of 'them' and 'us'. We should recall that are all human beings together on a planet that increasingly threatens every one of us, our children and grandchildren.