

Celebrate the Constitution by Becoming an Activist

Written by John W. Whitehead
Tuesday, 15 September 2009 12:48

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"I call not upon a few, but upon all: not on this state or that state, but on every state; up and help us; lay your shoulders to the wheel; better to have too much force than too little, when so great an object is at stake." -- Thomas Paine, 1776

Federal law mandates that all high schools, colleges, and universities across the country that receive federal funds host educational events about the Constitution on Constitution Day, September 17. There will also be various festivities in Washington, D.C., and in some communities across America celebrating the Constitution.

Yet we would do well to do more than pay lip service to the Constitution once a year. Formally adopted on September 17, 1787, it has long served as the bulwark of American freedom and as an example for struggling nations worldwide.

Unfortunately, the rights enshrined in the Constitution are under constant attack.

In fact, the protections and limitations on government power that were once so greatly prized by America's founders seem to be rapidly disappearing. Governmental tentacles now invade every facet of our lives. The president continues to expand his powers by centralizing power in his own office. And technology, which has developed at a rapid pace, offers those in government more invasive and awesome tools than ever before.

As government invariably, perhaps inevitably, oversteps its authority, Americans are faced with

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the pressing need to maintain the Constitution's checks against governmental power and abuse. After all, it was not idle rhetoric that prompted the framers of the Constitution to begin with the words "we the people."

If we are to maintain our freedoms, "we the people" need to become activists, even revolutionaries, for freedom. We forget the country started with a revolution. However, speaking truth to power is not an easy task. There can be no room for timidity or lukewarm emotions. We must meet the challenges of our day with passion, dedication, and courage. And we must demand that our government respect our rights. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Get educated. Most Americans are largely uneducated about their constitutional rights and liberties. Yet without knowledge, very little can be accomplished. Thus, you must know your rights. Take time to read the Constitution. Study and understand history, because the tales of those who seek power and those who resist it are part of an age-old story. Understand the vital issues of the day so that you can be cognizant of the threats to freedom. I emphasize with people that the Bill of Rights is only 462 words. It takes about five minutes to read if you are a slow reader. Know the Bill of Rights and teach them to your children.

2. Get involved. Become actively involved in local community affairs, politics, and legal battles. Think nationally but act locally. If our freedoms are to be restored, taking action at the local level must be the starting point. Getting involved in local politics is one way to bring about change.

Seek out every opportunity to voice your concerns, and demand that your government representatives account for their actions. Be relentless. And recognize that you don't have to go it alone. Engage those around you in discussions about issues of importance. Challenge them to be part of a national dialogue. And remember that those in power fear and respect numbers. Thus, while one person with a protest sign at a city planning meeting may be an irritant, three individuals with the same sign at the very same meeting constitute a movement.

3. Take action. Be prepared to mobilize at a moment's notice. It doesn't matter who you are, where you're located or what resources are at your disposal. What matters is that you recognize the problems and care enough to do something about them. Whether you're 8, 28, or 88, you have something unique to contribute. You don't have to be a hero. You just have to show up and be ready to take action.

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You can overcome the governmental behemoth with enough cunning, skill, and organization. Play to your strengths and assets. Conduct strategy sessions with others to develop both the methods and ways to force change. Be bold and imaginative, for this is guerrilla warfare -- not to be fought with tanks and guns but through creative methods of nonviolent dissent and resistance.

Effective use of the media is essential. Attracting media coverage not only enhances and magnifies your efforts; it is also a valuable educational tool. It publicizes your message to a much wider audience. It is through the media -- television, newspapers, Internet sites, bloggers, and so on -- that people find out about your growing resistance movement.

4. Don't back down. What was it that led to the successful activist movements of the past led by such people as Martin Luther King Jr.? Resolve and the refusal to be put off. When the time came, King was willing to take to the streets for what he believed and even go to jail if necessary. King risked having an arrest record by committing acts of nonviolent civil disobedience. He was even willing to sacrifice himself. Thus, if any movement is to be truly successful, it must be manned by individuals who seek a greater good and do not waver from their purposes. After all, freedom is not free. There is always a price to be paid and a sacrifice to be made.

5. Finally, keep hope alive. Although our rights are increasingly coming under attack, we still have certain freedoms. We can still fight back. We still have the right to dissent, to protest, and even to vigorously criticize or oppose the government and its laws. The Constitution guarantees us these rights. If you know your rights, you can bring about change in the government, but it will often mean speaking out when others are silent. It won't be easy, but take heart. And don't give up.

Much like the colonists who dared to stand up to Great Britain in 1776, we too must confront the massive machinery of government. They brought about a revolution because of their courageous tenacity. Likewise, if we are to pull through these trying times with our freedoms intact, it will take the dedication of each and every one of us.

Time is of the essence.

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