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**The Ninth
Sol Feinstone Lecture**

**THE
MEANING OF FREEDOM**

**(On the Nature
of Freedom)**

by
Dr. Carl E. Sagan

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The United States Military Academy is pleased to sponsor an annual lecture series on the Meaning of Freedom. It is significant that this lecture program has been made possible by the generosity of the late Mr. Sol Feinstone, a dedicated American patriot whose commitment to the ideals of the American Revolution led him to devote many years of effort, as well as considerable personal resources, to the collection of important letters, manuscripts, and books dealing with our heritage of freedom. His donation of these items to libraries and educational institutions insures that the message which they proclaim will be preserved and transmitted to future generations of Americans.

Mr. Feinstone's abiding faith in a brotherhood of free nations of men has found further expression in several lecture series which he has endowed in order to permit prominent Americans to interpret The Meaning of Freedom.

The U. S. Corps of Cadets and the staff and faculty of the Military Academy are pleased to recognize the generosity and loyalty of this great American for providing a living endowment in the defense of freedom.

THE MEANING OF FREEDOM*

About 20 years ago, I found myself at a scientific meeting in Warsaw, a conference on space science attended by delegates from many different nations. There were a set of pigeonholes where messages were left, and one day, while sorting through the dreary announcements of sessions I didn't want to go to, I noticed standing next to me, peering into *his* pigeonhole, a gentleman with a blue tunic, high collar and epicanthic folds; so I said to him, "I see that you are a citizen of the People's Republic of China." This was in the early '60's, and I had never met anybody from People's China before. He looked up, at my chinos and my Hush Puppies and me, and replied in perfect English, "And I see that you are a citizen of the United States of America." So we got to talking — not primarily about clothing — and somehow the discussion drifted to the question of freedom.

I was then, as I am now, a great admirer of the little book by John Stuart Mill called *On Liberty*. Being still in my twenties, with a far from complete grasp of the social niceties, I thought this was a fine opportunity to speak my mind to a representative of a totalitarian state — although he was, of course, just a scientist who happened to be born in China, and was no more responsible for the domestic or international policies of China than I am for those of the United States. I stressed the argument, very admirably presented by Mill, about how it is to the benefit of any society to have a vigorous exchange of views, how the ideas which are most abhorrent to the political system are precisely the ones which ought to be encouraged to proliferate — because only in that way can we see the merits and shortcomings of the system we happen, generally by an accident of birth, to be living in. I talked about freedom as an error-correcting mechanism, very much as you might expect of a scientist, because the correction of errors is the heart and soul of the scientific method. Arguments from authority don't count; contentions have to be validated repeatedly. In science, unlike politics or religion, you can't get away with saying "I know it's true but don't ask for the evidence." It seemed to me that the rules of scientific evidence were good for politics as well, although this is a position not very often advocated.

By this time, we had accreted, in ones and twos, essentially the entire delegation from People's China. We had created an impromptu symposium. Clearly, I was as much a novelty for them as they were for me. One of the newly arrived scientists intervened, also in quite good English: "I've lived in London. There the newspapers print as fact the personal, biased self-serving opinions of the rich people who own the

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newspapers." He pointed out especially Lord Beaverbrook's *London Daily Express*. I could not contradict him, because what he said, at least for that newspaper at that time, was essentially true. But I replied, "That may well be, but in London one can buy a newspaper called *The Daily Worker* which presents a communist point of view, and yet I presume that in Peking you could not buy a newspaper like *The London Daily Express* which represents a capitalist point of view." Their first response was that *The Daily Worker* was not a communist newspaper, but only a "Soviet revisionist rag." Their second response was that I didn't understand their point of view.

"Of course you can't buy *The London Daily Express* in Peking. And a good thing too. Look," he continued, "suppose I was walking down a street in Peking and I saw somebody standing under a lamp-post, somebody I never met before, and he is reading" (it's an interesting image) "*The London Daily Express*. I would walk up to this person, snatch the newspaper from his hands, tear it up into little pieces, and explain that the majority of the people in China do not approve of the publication he is reading." So we had a difference of opinion on the proper response to an unorthodox view.

"But what if you're wrong about what's good or bad for China?" I asked. "Let me give you another example: Is it possible that of the 800 million people in China" (or however many there were at that time — I guess it would be a little less) "there's someone better suited than Mao Zedong, by whatever criteria you like, to be Chairman of the Communist Party?" This resulted in a rather lengthy discussion in Chinese. But remember that these were scientists, so they were more temperamentally inclined than some others to encourage the emergence of truth from dogma. (This slight tendency can also be noticed in the Soviet Union and in the West.) They replied that Chairman Mao had an enormous number of remarkable qualities, but yes, it was, in principle, conceivable that of the 800 million people in China there was someone better suited to be Chairman. "Well, what can you do about that? Could you, for example, write a letter to the *Jinmin Jih Pao*" (the *People's Daily*), "saying, 'hey, I know someone who would be a better Chairman than Mao Zedong?'" They were aghast. So I went to the other end of the spectrum: "Okay, could you tell one friend?" After a short consultation, they answered "Yes, if he were reliable." "Could you get up on a little box in the main square of Peking and tell passersby about this highly qualified individual?" "Certainly not!" "Could you tell *two* friends?" "Yes, if they were reliable." So in this way we converged on the number six.

Okay. That seemed to me to demonstrate that these guys lived in a dreadful society where the most elementary freedoms were missing. What's more, such an arrangement wasn't even in their own interest,

because they could do nothing to encourage the most qualified people, by their *own* criteria, to positions of leadership. They understood what I felt. They recognized the expressions on my face. They gave me an explanation:

They said that a major relaxation of restrictions on the expression of personal opinion tended to be disorderly; that it implied a certain instability in China; that it would encourage their enemies. They told me about enemies. They showed me a little map of the sort that we don't see much of. For us, China is sort of off at the end of the Mercator projection. On this map, China was in the *middle* of the Mercator projection. They showed me the border with the Soviet Union, and Vietnam where the United States was beginning to send "advisors," and the U.S. Pacific Fleet and India, with whom they'd recently been at war. They pointed to Taiwan, bristling with arms and begging to be "unleashed." They were, they said soberly, surrounded by enemies. They reminded me of a little history, including the Opium Wars of the 19th Century: the Chinese had not tried to make a nation of drug addicts out of the British, although the reverse *was* attempted — by professional military officers and men acting on behalf of the British Crown and Parliament, but fundamentally aiding corporate profits and the balance of payments. The American coastline hadn't been carved up into foreign territorial "concessions" despite the opposition of the indigenous population. The Chinese coastline had. They didn't quote exactly, but almost did, the remark of Will Rogers about how we would feel if Chinese gunboats sailed up the Mississippi to look after their laundry concessions in St. Louis. But they did ask me where the United States was, the supposed champion of freedom and liberty and the self-determination of peoples, when, in the nineteenth century, all the major European powers plus Japan were carving up China. And wasn't it a little hypocritical of me to complain about restrictions on their freedom *now* when they were trying to create a stable national regime in which they could experience a little self-respect and international dignity? "We recognize the importance of freedom," they said. "It's only that we can't afford it right now. Maybe in another generation or two. We are working for our grandchildren."

The idea that freedom might be appropriate in some circumstances but not in others got me thinking. What might be the most general and valid approach to the issue of freedom? Human beings are, like all the other beasts and vegetables on the planet, organisms. We are the products of some four billion years of biological evolution, and for all of us the past is essential to an understanding of the present. As life evolves, the creatures get more complicated, by and large. There are certainly lots of simple creatures still around today. But the most complex organisms are a lot more complex than the most complex

organisms of, say, a few hundred million years ago. One-celled organisms can't fly. Birds can't travel in space. There is a significant increase in the capability of living things as time goes on. We have, you might say, more freedoms than our ancestors did.

But at the same time, freedom is severely constrained at all evolutionary levels by the laws of nature and by the history of the evolutionary process. There are things we can't do, no matter what — like travel faster than light. There is a range of things that humans can do that other plants and animals can't, but there are also a great many things that we can't do and, probably, will never be able to do. We humans are freer than many organisms, but there is of course no such thing as being completely free.

The one key to the question of freedom can be found, I believe, in the evolution of the human brain. (What follows is a brief review of some ground covered in my book *The Dragons of Eden*.) I will refer to work based upon the findings of the neurophysiologist Paul MacLean of the National Institute of Mental Health. At the base of the brain, just above the spinal cord, is a kind of neural chassis, which controls all the things that are done automatically, breathing and heartbeat and all of that. Sitting immediately on top of the neural chassis is a brain component called the "R-complex," R for reptile. It evolved several hundred million years ago; we share it with the reptiles. In our heads is a kind of reptile brain. A crocodile neurophysiologist would recognize it readily. But it is in the nature of the R-complex that there are no crocodile neurophysiologists. They can't do science; they only have crocodile brains. The R-complex is in charge, according to MacLean, of aggression, territoriality, ritual, and the establishment of social hierarchies — or, as I might call it before this audience, chain of command.

Above the R-complex is the "limbic system" which evolved some tens of millions of years ago, and which we share with all the other mammals, but not with reptiles, say, or amphibians, or fish. It's in charge of strong, vivid emotions, ranging from rage to cowering fear, loyalty, altruism, care of the young, love — a diversity of emotions that we tend sometimes to think of as characteristically human. But a little inspection shows that we very likely share these feelings with all the cats and dogs and other mammals.

Finally, on top of the limbic system and comprising by far the greatest part of the brain mass is the neocortex, evolved in a major way only a few millions of years ago, and responsible for the characteristically human qualities of our species. Besides a great many neurons being devoted to perception, especially visual perception, the neocortex is in charge of planning a course of action, anticipating the future, analytic and intuitive thinking, language, mathematics, art,

science. It is mainly the neocortex which is being instructed at institutions of higher learning, such as this. We come into the world with our R-complexes and limbic systems intact. They know more or less what to do. But the neocortices know very little and need a lot of instructing for a long period of time. This is one of the strengths of the human species, that you can put into the brain a great deal of information which is new, that you're not stuck mainly with data tens or hundreds of millions of years old. Information that old sometimes tends to be obsolete. The neocortex is the reason we can move with the times.

These three components of the brain — R-complex, limbic system, neocortex — all live together inside our heads in a kind of uneasy truce. While based upon neurophysiological and evolutionary evidence, this circumstance could also be considered a kind of metaphor about the struggles between instincts and feelings on the one hand and what is sometimes called our better nature on the other. Through introspection every one of us recognizes such an interior conflict raging, at least occasionally. Since some 75 percent or so of the brain mass is in the neocortex, it by no means follows that we have to be dominated by the R-complex. But some of us are.

Nature has devised a very clever and complex behavior mechanism for making dominance hierarchies work. I would like to quote from a distinguished psychiatrist, Erich Fromm, in a famous book, *Escape From Freedom* (which I had the pleasure to re-read as a result of being invited to give the Feinstone lecture; I thank you for the opportunity): "For the authoritarian personality there exist, so to speak, two sexes, the powerful one and the powerless ones. His love, admiration and readiness for submission are automatically aroused by power, whether of a person or of an institution. Power fascinates him, not for any values for which a specific power may stand, but just because it is power. Just as his love is automatically aroused by power, so powerless people or institutions automatically arouse his contempt. The very sight of a powerless person makes him want to attack, dominate, humiliate."

There is no question that individuals like this exist. Hierarchies powerfully attract and mold such people. This personality type represents a means, devised by nature, to construct a dominance hierarchy. As the phrase "pecking order" indicates, the mechanism goes far back into the pre-human past. It would be interesting to determine what percentage of the population of various nations exhibits this personality type, and what other traits it is correlated with. The personality type is sometimes called authoritarian, sometimes sadomasochistic. Except, say, in Nazi Germany, it's rarely considered respectable. Such people are the natural enemies of freedom.

Now, why does such a personality type exist at all? What is it good

for? Either it is taught by the society, or it is genetically preprogrammed; if you consider what the R-complex is good at, I think you will agree that, at least to some extent, the authoritarian personality is preprogrammed. At some level it's in each of us. Well, let's imagine two kinds of worlds. In the first, things are largely static and unchanging so that if you have a fix, a way of dealing with the environment and your surroundings, it will remain valid for a very long period of time. (A little later, we'll consider the opposite kind of world, in which things are changing tremendously fast.) Now, in this static world, what's the big danger? A potential calamity arises when the behavior codes, both learned and inherited, codes that work very well, are threatened by some deviant who thinks people should behave differently. (Note, incidentally, the emotional burden that the word "deviant" has accrued.) If there's a nearly perfect connection between your environment and your behavior any random change is very likely to be deleterious: It's going to make you and your tribe less well-adapted. When your environment is static, behavioral changes are dangerous.

If that's the case, it's essential to make the strictest rules. It's imperative to enforce rigid adherence to the conventional wisdom. So this necessitates hierarchical organization, so that you can control what everyone thinks; uncritical respect for authority; official religions that no one is permitted to dissent from; discouragement of human creativity (because — who knows? — someone will have an idea that will be different from what we all need to believe); rigid discipline of children; capital punishment; torturing of enemies; and rule by fear. Now, this doesn't sound like a pleasant sort of culture. It is a set of authoritarian conditions set by governments that we are taught to dislike; we are trained to recognize that such a society is oppressive and undesirable.

But why? Why is it undesirable? Because we don't live in a static environment; we live in an extremely dynamic one, and in our environment all of these characteristics are maladaptive. (I don't just mean that a sadomasochistic personality in charge of nuclear weapons is a bad mix, although that represents one of the peculiar perils of our age.) Let's consider a society like our own, subject to enormous external changes of whatever origin. Then the opposites of all the foregoing traits become adaptive. Now you want very carefully to limit the scope of hierarchical organizations, to restrict the bureaucracies. You want to discourage blind respect for authority; you need just the opposite: systematic and constructive challenges to the conventional wisdom. A supervening official religion now represents a stultifying intellectual conformity on many of the great issues we face; you want instead to encourage the most varied sorts of human creativity, because you don't

know from which area of art or science or politics the essential new ideas will come. You must be very free in the raising of children — so they will delight in new ideas. You're opposed to capital punishment because you know you can make a mistake, and you're committed to the proposition that people are able to change their behavior. Likewise, torturing of enemies, rule by fear — those are ineffective ways to encourage diversity. Now this constellation of governmental attitudes we in the United States are taught, more or less, to admire, to consider desirable, whether or not in fact it corresponds to our own social reality.

Those are adaptive qualities, but only because we live in a time of enormous change. (In fact, we live in a moment of absolutely unparalleled change in the history of the human species.) But if we lived in another time and place, we might have as much horror for this collection of freedom-oriented virtues as we in the United States have been taught to feel for the defining characteristics of authoritarian regimes. Both kinds of behavior are human, although only the neocortical activities are uniquely human. I don't think it's very productive to revile one or the other of these sets of traits, but only to see which are relevant for the times we live in.

If we were designed from scratch, as a social organism which has to survive both during times of extreme change and during times of almost no change at all, you would want a mix of these two kinds of human characteristics, some compromise between rigidity and chaos. Every society makes such a compromise. But in times of immense change, you want to lean far over towards promoting the greatest number of individual freedoms. In genetics, you find something very similar: mutations provide the raw material for natural selection to work on, and the opportunity to adapt to a changing environment. But organisms have gone so far as to develop genes which control the mutation rates of other genes, because it is essential that they be able to increase the mutation rate at times when the environment is changing fast. We need a very high social mutation rate today, because things are changing with astonishing rapidity:

In the 17th Century, Queen Anne of England gave birth to 16 children. Not one of them lived beyond the age of 10. They had the best medical care you could buy in the 17th Century. Worldwide at that time, half of all children born did not live beyond the first year. Think of that kind of world. Think about the emotional stresses it put on parents in every walk of life. Think of how those stresses communicated themselves to the children growing up — the sense that you probably would not live past puberty. And now think of what an enormous change has occurred in the subsequent three centuries because of the advances in medical science and practice.

Now, think of something quite different. Think of the speed of communication. Essentially, two centuries ago, that speed was the velocity of the horse. Today it's the velocity of light. You can't send a message faster than the velocity of light. We have not only improved our communications speed by some enormous factor — like ten thousand — but we have gone in the last two centuries to the absolute limit of communication speed that is possible according to the laws of physics. No further improvement is, so far as we know, even possible.

Likewise, there have been enormous changes, although not quite so great, in the speed of transportation. Think of the consequences of widely available, efficient contraceptives on human behavior (and what problems they pose for traditional approaches to sexuality based almost entirely on R-complex and limbic system perceptions). Think of the exponentiating world population growth, the opposite point in a way, which is at an extremely steep incline right now. Think of the fact that we now have the capability for inadvertent climate modification. We can, just by engaging in innocent activities which were not intended to hurt anybody, change the climate of the world: Burn enough coal, heat the Earth, melt the polar caps, inundate the coastal cities. Think of the exhaustion of mineral and fossil fuel resources. And finally, think of the capability for self-destruction. We now can destroy every human being on the planet Earth. That was never before the case.

There is a heavy responsibility that falls on our shoulders, our generation especially. This is unquestionably a time of unprecedented change. It follows that this is the time when the burden of freedom is greatest. The survival value of freedom is today so large that, it seems to me, it's worth making very major efforts to preserve it and encourage it. This is not particularly easy: it implies that we must be willing not only to hear, but even to consider, ideas we feel are abhorrent, concepts that impudently contradict the conventional wisdom. Alfred North Whitehead said "it is the business of the future to be dangerous." But the future will be far more dangerous — in fact, I believe, lethal — if we are not willing to break the mold of familiar attitudes and responses, and become open to major social, behavioral and policy changes.

Freedom is not a virtue in itself. It is a means to an end. That end is the survival of the human species and the security and maximum possible development of every individual. Today especially, freedom is adaptive behavior.

The history of the human species can be described as a gradually broadening extension of the group with which we chiefly identify. There are many cultures that still call themselves "*the people*" or "*all men*." And it's a bunch of, you know, 103 individuals: *We're the*

humans. All the rest of these guys, who knows what they are? They're strange. They're certainly not human. (They have a barbaric jackal totem, while we have a civilized hyaena totem.) Something like this was the general state of the competitively most successful groups ten thousand years ago. You owed fealty to a closely knit group with whom you were fairly closely at peace. But those other groups you bumped into, you owed them nothing. Our identification horizons have grown dramatically since then. Human sacrifice was endemic on the Earth until between 3000 to 1000 B.C., when all over the world people decided they could do without it — although, in, say, Mexico it survived for another 2500 years. After the Renaissance, slavery, which had been with us for millennia, rapidly declined — although, unfortunately, the United States and Russia were hardly among the first nations to abolish it. The treatment of women has dramatically improved in the last century — although there is still a great deal of room for further progress.

Along with these substantial advances in the expression of our humanity, people have embraced larger and larger communities. Two thousand years ago, the largest group that most individuals identified with was about a million people in number. I'm thinking about some harmonic mean between individuals who lived in small communities and individuals who lived in the Roman or Chinese Empires. By 1500 A.D. the average group with whom you identified included perhaps ten million people. Today, the average person on the planet Earth identifies with a group which is something like many hundreds of millions in extent — although residual affiliations, down to groups of tribal size and perspective, of course remain. (The pace of change has been so rapid that the large-group identifications are often sketchy and incomplete, a circumstance psychiatrists describe as "alienation." While there are obvious retrogressive as well as progressive steps, the overall trend, on a time-scale of centuries, is towards a planetary identification, although a serious approach to the problem of alienation seems, for all mass societies, to lie in the future.)

The curve of how many people on the planet Earth we identify with as a function of time is in a steep ascent. At least until the Second World War, the curve representing the number of people killed per war has also been exponentiating rapidly in global average. The next big war might just kill everybody. This leads to a key question: Will global identification occur before nuclear war? There are two tendencies pushing and pulling the human species in opposite directions. We are breathlessly awaiting the outcome.

In this critical moment, fortuitously, there is a mechanism evolving that leads, in an almost unconscious way, to a global self-identification. That mechanism is spaceflight. When we see a picture of

the Earth taken from an altitude of even a few hundred kilometers, much less from the distance of the Moon, our first thought is frequently how lovely our planet is. But our second thought is often how isolated it seems; a beautiful, multicolored blue and white and green world, set against the utter blackness of space. Our third thought might be that it's extremely difficult to see national boundaries from such a vantage point. They somehow don't show up. There is a growing awareness of the Earth as one common and fragile homeland for every person on the planet, a dawning sense that all those other worlds that we have looked at, as exquisite and instructive as they are, are desolate by the standards of the Earth. That insight helps us to cherish and preserve our planet, and to take even the most extreme measures to avoid that self-destruction which our neocortices have not permitted our R-complexes to bring about.

In this same moment, we have come to know all of the surface of the Earth. The Earth is, except for the ocean bottoms, utterly explored. There are no fundamentally new places to go to on our planet. And that dynamic, restless, exploratory fraction of the human community is in a state of uncomfortable containment. There's a real danger that those energies that historically have been directed outward will get turned entirely inwards — a very risky prospect in an age of thermonuclear weapons. But at this same moment, we have the opportunity to venture to other worlds, to explore directly or vicariously environments far stranger than any that the early explorers ever experienced. And when the time comes for manned and womanned exploration of other worlds, the military virtues of organization and valor will be greatly needed. I hope that, because we recognize the dangers of nuclear self-destruction, there will be a growing global awareness that the human community must phase out nuclear weapons. Some of the military establishments can then be gainfully employed in more honorable work — up there, where the long evolutionary voyage to greater freedoms will, if we are not unforgivably careless and foolish, continue.

If we can't prevent change, there is no alternative: We must accommodate to freedom. Our dedication to freedom — freedom to inquire, freedom to publish, freedom to assemble, freedom to argue, freedom to be difficult and annoying and have views that most people dislike — that dedication, plus our intellect and our compassion for others, are the tools for our survival.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER . . .

Dr. Carl E. Sagan is a noted astronomer, astrophysicist, exobiologist, educator, writer, NASA advisor, and writer and host narrator of the recent public television series "*Cosmos*." He was born in New York City, but his family later moved to Rahway, New Jersey, where he graduated from high school. At the age of 16, he entered the University of Chicago. Nine years later, before he was 26, he left Chicago with a Ph.D. in astronomy and astrophysics.

He spent two years of postdoctoral study at the University of California at Berkley from 1960 to 1962. During the 1962 academic year he was visiting assistant professor of genetics at the Stanford University School of Medicine. After 1963, he served as staff member of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory and as assistant professor of astronomy at Harvard University. After five years at Harvard, Cornell beckoned him with an offer to set up a laboratory of planetary studies. Since 1968, Dr. Sagan has been the director of the Laboratory for Planetary Studies and the David Duncan Professor of Astronomy and Space Sciences at Cornell.

Dr. Sagan has been a visiting professor and lecturer at a number of prestigious colleges and universities including Oregon, Princeton, Dartmouth, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Toronto, Haverford College, American University, the University of Washington, the University of Texas and the Royal Institute in London.

He has also been a member of various advisory groups, including NASA and the National Academy of Science. He is a member of the council of the Smithsonian Institution and the International Council of Science. He served as a lecturer to the Apollo flight crews at NASA from 1969 to 1972 and, more recently, as an advisor and scientific investigator on unmanned space missions.

A prolific writer, he has published over 400 scientific and popular articles. He is the author, co-author, or editor of more than a dozen books, including *Intelligent Life In The Universe*, *The Dragons Of Eden*, *The Cosmic Connection*, *Murmurs Of Earth*, *Broca's Brain*, and *Cosmos*. His book *The Cosmic Connection* won the Campbell Memorial Award for the best science book of the year. Both *Cosmos* and *The Dragons of Eden* were chosen as Book-of-the-Month Club selections. In 1978, Dr. Sagan won the Pulitzer Prize for literature.

Harvard University awarded Dr. Sagan the A. Calvert Smith Prize in 1964, and the State of Oregon made him its Condon lecturer in 1968. He won NASA's Apollo Achievement Award in 1970, and in 1975 he received the Joseph Priestley Award "for distinguished contribution to the welfare of mankind."



SOL FEINSTONE'S CREDO

DEDICATED TO

The Judeo-Christian commitment of self-sacrifice for peace on earth, and the brotherhood of free nations of free men;

The Spirit of '76, a struggle of free men to remain free;

The immigrants who came after the revolution and helped build our country in freedom;

The underprivileged of all races who, by uplifting themselves, will raise all mankind to a higher humanity.

MY DEFINITION OF FREEDOM

In the beginning there was the void of sameness; the spark of life made everything different.

The stamp of sameness is the stamp of death.

Freedom to me means a social order based on individual freedom to live differently and to dream differently. I dream of a Brotherhood of Free Nations of Free Men.

Sol Feinstone

