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The Third
Sol Feinstone Lecture

THE
MEANING OF FREEDOM

by
Herman Wouk

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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 Mr. Sol Feinstone, a dedicated American patriot whose commitment to the ideals of the American Revolution has 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 will insure 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 free 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.

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THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

(or THE WORDS ON THE LIBERTY BELL)

The meaning of freedom is a rough subject to take on, especially at West Point in this troubled time. The topic is given. I'll do my best with it. I could, of course, stay out of trouble by going the Calvin Coolidge route. You remember that this taciturn Vermonter, coming home from church on a Sunday, was asked by his wife what the minister's sermon had been about.

"Sin," the President answered.

"Well, what did he say?"

"He was against it."

So, if I were to play it safe, you might tell your friends afterward that Herman Wouk's lecture was about freedom.

"Well, what did he say?"

"He was for it."

I'm for freedom. So are you, I trust. But where does that get us? What are we for, precisely? The concept of freedom in truth is very tangled. The word is sacrosanct. The actualities—in America, in the world, and right here at West Point—are muddled, puzzling, and daunted by contradictions.

On the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, are words you know, a verse from Leviticus 25, "*Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof.*" Leviticus 25 happens to be part of our synagogue Bible reading this week, so I've been reviewing it; and in order to stake out my main point, I'm going to inflict a little Hebrew philology on you.

The word for freedom or liberty in Leviticus 25, is *dror*. In modern Israel quite a different word means "freedom": *herut*. Israel's political nationalists are known quite simply as *Herut*, the Freedom Party. In the context of politics, *dror* would be grotesque usage. Yet both words stand in the Hebrew lexicon.

Dror comes from the root *dor*, "to dwell." It suggests the ability to live anywhere. Typically the word applies to wild birds, who fly free and nest where they please. *Dror* then has the color of individual liberty, the freedom of every man to go his own way, spelled out in the Bill of Rights; that precious natural endowment into which all of us Americans are born.

*The Third Annual Sol Feinstone Lecture at the United States Military Academy on "The Meaning of Freedom." Text edited and revised from a tape of an extemporaneous talk, May 11, 1976. Copyright 1976 by Herman Wouk.

Herut is something else. It is national freedom, the freedom of a people from foreign masters. Passover is called *zman herut*, "the time of freedom," of release from slavery in Egypt. Now, in this distinction—between the freedom of man and songbird to go their unfettered ways, and the freedom of the nation, or the race, or the tribe from alien rule—we can look for much of the modern tension and muddle about the idea.

It was an axiom of the American and French revolutions, and of the philosophers whose ideas sparked these majestic overturns, that a supreme human good was individual freedom. One had to abolish the absolutist regimes of the kings and restore the natural rights of man. Once that was done, the world would surely progress to the universal brotherhood of free and equal individuals. Individual liberty was the political core of the enlightenment, and the chief theme of the great 18th century uprisings.

Throughout the 19th century, at least in the liberal tradition, it remained an article of faith. We went to war in the 20th century, you recall, "to make the world safe for democracy," that is, for the politics of individual freedom. After World War I we became cynical about that slogan, but at the time it was sacred. Smash the last remnants of the reactionary divine right of kings, symbolized in the spike-helmeted German Kaiser, and—so the fervent hope ran—history's curtain would drop once for all on the old bad times. When the Russian Czar fell in mid-war, liberals were happy that a royal tyrant had fallen, though he was in the war on our side. Lenin made a separate peace with Germany, leaving the democracies to struggle on against the Kaiser; still, Lenin's revolution seemed, to many freedom-lovers, a new dawn in human affairs.

But ever since World War I a strange and unforeseen historical process has been going on. Your politicians are still wrestling with it; your social philosophers, too. It will confront you in your military careers as long as you serve. It is commonplace in everyday journalism and no longer surprises us. Yet it should.

In nation after nation, people have either been voting away democracy, or tamely submitting to losing it. The fall of kings and colonial empires has not led to the brotherhood of free and equal men. Not in the least. Dictators and juntas have risen instead; makeshift and generally brutish new autocrats, lacking even the traditional civility, as well as the legitimacy, of the old elites.

The Russian Revolution itself began in freedom, you recall. When the Czar fell in April, 1917, the Kerensky regime promul-

gated a Bill of Rights much like America's. In October, 1917, Lenin crushed that regime, to the cheers of the St. Petersburg mob, and proclaimed temporary open terror and total social control in the name of "the proletariat." Lenin's iron terror and control survive scarcely changed after fifty years, and his healthy-looking mummy is all but worshipped under glass in the Kremlin.

In Germany, after World War I, the Weimar Republic was almost a model free society. It lasted less than fifteen years. Then the German nation embraced the bellicose lunatic Hitler at the ballot box as their beloved national savior.

Shift the scene to Asia, the time to yesterday. Viet Nam in the north was communist; the south was supposed to be fighting for freedom. Yet in the "enslaved" North the people showed fighting elan and national cohesion; in the "free" South they were flabby and spiritless; nothing we did could shore them up; there was no way to help them to victory, because there was nobody to be victorious.

Freedom as we Americans understand it, then, seems not to be an ultimate good that all other men live for. Where's the difference? What made the Germans march rejoicing after Hitler to their national doom? What made the Italians follow the savage blustering clown, Mussolini? What made the strong and gifted Russians bow their backs to Lenin's taskmasters, endure the slaughters and Gulags of Stalin, and meekly go on serving their totalitarian successors to this day? What makes the freed dominions and colonies in Africa and in Asia accept dictators, ranging from the intelligent but ruthless Madam Gandhi to the raving buffoon Amin? What made the difference between North and South Viet Nam? What's wrong—in short—with the 18th century axiom of the supreme preciousness of *dror*?

All questions of consequence are easier to ask than to answer. I shall at any rate suggest here three obvious limits to the ideal of individual freedom.

Let's start with another look at the Liberty Bell.

Leviticus 25 deals with the Jubilee Year, the key to Bible economics. Once every fifty years, when "liberty was proclaimed throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof," with great trumpeting, certain things happened in ancient Israel. All debts were cancelled. All bondsmen went free. All land reverted to its original owners. Henry George, the influential American economist, wrote in *Progress and Poverty* that this remarkable law of Moses

was the one ultimate way of social justice. No accumulation of capital was possible for more than half a century. At that point the gains of the social game—whether won through talent, luck, or chicanery—went back in the communal pot, as it were, to be shared out equally once agin.

I'm not discussing now the possibility in our day of this simple radical rule in an old agrarian theocracy. I'm just telling you what the words on the Liberty Bell are about. Our Founding Fathers knew the context. I wish we studied the Bible as they did. The ideal of economic equality—or at least of a chance for it, and of institutions to redress lopsided accumulations of wealth—lay joined in their minds with the concept of liberty.

The favorite jeer of Soviet communists and of our native rebels—I've had to answer it often enough—is, "Oh, yes, freedom for what? Freedom to starve?"

The main impact of communism is the promise of absolute economic equality. The "dictatorship of the proletariat" is supposed to suppress the exploiters and bring on the everlasting jubilee; whereupon the regime withers away, and everyone not only becomes free, but equal in ownership of everything. We now know, from fifty years of watching the Soviet Union, that what happens instead is the rise of new harsher exploiters, who not only suppress personal freedom for good, but impose stark inequalities by means of secret police, concentration camps, and firing squads. Yet so seductive is the promise of absolute economic equality, and so outrageous the grasp on privilege of some inept upper classes, that even today we see clever people like the Italians flirting at the ballot box with the Marxist illusion. In underprivileged countries everywhere the slogans still ring. The brilliant but improverished Chinese people fell under the Marxist sway, after a century of cruel foreign exploitation. Personal freedom, without some hope for economic justice, is plainly not enough.

Nations abandon democracy out of fear. In the Second World War, dictatorial powers were freely voted even to Churchill and Roosevelt, who wielded them circumspectly. Dictatorships rise and thrive on fear: fear of a foreign enemy, fear of internal upheaval. Personal freedom is of small comfort when danger threatens, or seems to. Hitler, the prototype of the freedom-destroyer, heavily used fear in his quick climb to power: fear of military encirclement without, fear of Jewish superdevils within. Most skillfully he mixed this with the false economic equality promises of National Socialism.

This national aspect of Hitler's socialism brings us to the third limit on *dror*: and that is *herut* itself.

We, none of us live by ourselves. The Thoreaus are romantic freaks. We have a nationality, central to our identity. We want the self-respect of belonging to a free nation, a free community, a free tribe, a free race; free in the sense of having no alien masters. Our own may abuse us, abuse us bitterly, but that is our business. They are our kind.

The Germans and the Italians were defeated and deprived peoples after World War I. Hitler and Mussolini promised them restoration as great nations, equal in the power structure of Europe. That was the appeal to *herut*, and it worked. For that, more than for anything else, these civilized Europeans proudly marched away from their individual liberties. We have to live with that historical fact. We have to work with it in making future policy.

We have to learn at least one rough lesson from Viet Nam, it seems to me; and that is, that people would rather be ruled badly by their own, than be overrun by benevolent foreigners with better things to offer. When different skin color is in the picture, too, this urge for *herut*—the Africans call it *uhuru*—becomes cardinal. That is how things are. If we absorb that much, we will have advanced from the 18th to the 20th century. The bicentennial will have been a time of learning, as well as a wingding.

Now, about the Academy.

When you come into West Point, you more or less check the Bill of Rights at the door. You never wholly retrieve it until you retire from the service. That you know. Why do you do it? Cynical answers go around in your rap sessions, I'm sure. You were beguiled by adolescent patriotic ideals; now you're in this thing. You've got time and energy committed, so you'll see it through. Economic security and a sort of solid career lie ahead, and at the end of twenty-five years you're out. I know that sort of answer as well as you do.

It's not all of it. It's not enough to create anything great. Our Army and our Navy have shown historic greatness in this century, greatness that does not come from time-serving, but from something stronger and deeper. I will suggest what that is. If you think my idea naive or romantic you're free to do so. A few of you in this room will know I'm right.

I suggest to you that the national freedom of America rests on the willingness of an able few to give up personal freedom in

the necessary discipline of a military arm. On a planet which is mostly not free, a free society can only live by such a sacrifice of this able few. That is the guts of the matter. The *herut* of the United States stands or falls by the vision, and the impulse to serve, that leads a few good men to yield up their *dror*.

I don't think that the philosophers of the 18th century were wrong about the love of men for freedom. Take a baby and pinion its limbs. See how it struggles. The urge for freedom is a radical animal urge. Look at the tragic faces of prisoners in their cages. Personal freedom remains a profound human yearning. But in a rapidly developing modern world, where such freedom even in fortunate lands is scarcely 200 years old, the struggle for it is often defeated by fear, by economic inequality, and by the fierce urge for national independence.

Yet the world knows well the freedom that exists in the United States of America. I've travelled in the Soviet Union. Fellows have come up to me, offering me roubles (which I can't take) for my button-down shirt; asking me, "Do you have a pair of jeans I can buy?" What's the difference whether a shirt has buttons on the collar or not? What do a pair of jeans mean? These are symbols of that land of the free that Russians know about, that all the communist propaganda can't shout away.

I say to you, that with all our imperfections, which at least we keep trying to correct—our persisting inequalities, our fouling of God's earth and air and water, our recurring waves of political corruption, our often mephitic magazines and movies, our depressing television insipidities, and so on—with everything that is wrong with us, I say, this country remains the land of the free, and the world knows it. If the world could elect a way to be, it would choose to be like the free Americans. In your careers you are preserving not only our country, but the dream that all the world has.

In the last five years, working on *The Winds of War* and its sequel, I've given up lecturing. I've spoken three times: to the Naval Academy, to the Naval War College, and now to the United States Military Academy. It isn't because I'm a militarist. I'm not intrigued by the uniform, or by the romance of war. Let me make this plain to you. In my view war is a massive criminal absurdity, the last gasp of the destructive infancy of mankind. It is of a piece with human sacrifice and human slavery, of which indeed it is only a variant. I believe, heart and soul, that in days to come it will fade from the minds of men and nations as a possible way to behave. That is what I'm trying to say in my books.

But today we live in a world mostly not free, that still makes war and learns war. In that grim world, men like you guarantee the continuance of our free land, and of the dream of freedom. I feel proud to be asked to come and talk to you, and so here I am.

What did Wouk talk about?

Freedom.

What did he say?

He was for it.

Is that all he said?

Well, no.

What else did he say?

He said that there was personal freedom, and national freedom; that in the tug between these two lies the root of many political problems, now and probably far into the future; that in this tension too, lies the crux of the problems of the service man. He said that the United States with all its glaring imperfections was the greatest free society the world has known, worth sacrificing much for. He said that this is still the land of the free; but that will be true, only while it is the home of the brave.

And so, he said, he hoped his audience would all graduate next year to become goddamned good second lieutenants.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Herman Wouk brings a new dimension to the list of Sol Feinstein lecturers. This internationally-known American writer was born to Russian Jewish immigrants in New York City, May 27, 1915. At the age of nineteen, he received a BA from Columbia University.

Events leading to World War II drew him away from radio-script writing for Fred Allen; first to script writing for the U. S. Treasury's bond selling campaigns and then, after Pearl Harbor, to a commission in the U.S. Navy. Throughout World War II, Wouk had various duties aboard the destroyer-minesweepers USS ZANE and USS SOUTHARD during some of the heaviest fighting in the Pacific theater.

His career as a writer began shortly after his discharge from the U. S. Navy in 1946, with the publishing of his first novel, *Aurora Dawn*. Since then Wouk's place in American literature has been recognized with his works being selected for the Book-of-the-Month Club and his award of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Mr. Wouk's works include:

BOOKS: *Aurora Dawn, The City Boy, The Caine Mutiny, Margorie Morningstar, This is My God, Youngblood Hawke, Don't Stop the Carnival, and The Winds of War.*

PLAYS: *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial, The Traitor, and Nature's Way*