

Who Needs Courage?

"The Ambivalence of Political Courage" by Jason A. Scorza, in *The Review of Politics* (Fall 2001), Univ. of Notre Dame, P.O. Box B, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556.

Political courage is not much in favor among contemporary liberal political thinkers. They would gladly trade *courage* for *compassion*, Scorza notes. Many take their cue from Montesquieu, who was glad to see the spirited world of the ancients give way to the gentler spirit of commercial society. Philosopher Richard Rorty says of today's liberal democratic leaders: Even if they "are bland, calculating, petty, and unheroic, the prevalence of such people may be a reasonable price to pay for political freedom."



Churchill's bold front buoyed wartime Britain.

Scorza, a professor of political science and philosophy at Fairleigh Dickinson University, takes a different view. He acknowledges the earlier work of political scientist Judith Shklar, who warned in her 1989 essay "The Liberalism of Fear" about the cruelty and fear that "are the principal inhibitors of freedom." For Shklar, the "primary political evil for liberalism is institutionalized cruelty," the threat of death and torture that governments use against their own citizens. Against these threats, Scorza lists three different types of political courage that may be—and indeed ought to be—part of the liberal state. First is the

courage of patriotic citizens, the type of citizen-soldiers whom Pericles hailed in his Funeral Oration, when he called on "men of courage" who "were resolved that at least their country should not find herself deserted by their valor." Second is the courage of pragmatic leaders, who are willing to lay aside their "personal ethical beliefs" for the greater good of their people. Scorza cites the example of Daniel Webster during the Compromise of 1850, which strengthened the existing Fugitive Slave Law but delayed the Civil War. Finally, Scorza mentions the "courage of conscientious citizens" who must sometimes take a stand against decisions by their leaders that they find immoral or misguided.

Why do many liberal thinkers worry about the effects of courage? Because there are real dangers inherent in each form of courage. Citizen-soldiers, for instance, may be too likely to resort to violence rather than compromise when their nation is threatened, and they are much more prone to blind loyalty to leaders. The pragmatic officeholder may inadvertently and, perhaps, with the best of intentions, become a force not for progress and social justice but, rather, as Webster may have been, for injustice and the status quo. And the "conscientious citizen," while potentially uncovering or protesting wrongdoing, hovers perilously close to fanaticism. "Intoxicated by the romantic appeal of courageous political action, and blinded by their own ideals," such people may follow the dangerous path of such firebrands as John Brown.

Scorza acknowledges that each form of courage carries dangers when taken to extremes, but "all are needed, from time to time, by societies that aspire to social justice, stability, and personal freedom." The politically courageous may clash, but in doing so "they may also hinder the dire consequences that can stem from an excess of blind loyalty, a surplus of fanatical or solipsistic conscientiousness, or a proliferation of amoral pragmatism."