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Is the Land of the Free Still the Home of the Brave?

By James W. Muller

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By James W. Muller

When Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn addressed the graduates of Harvard on the eighth of June, 1978, they gathered in anticipation of an extraordinary event. But in his remarks, which he called *A World Split Apart*, Solzhenitsyn eschewed the kind of fulsome compliments now endemic in commencement speeches. Instead, taking advantage of the fact that Harvard's motto is "Veritas," he ventured to tell them the truth: that "a decline in courage may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West today." Speaking barely three years after the fall of Saigon, he observed in Americans something approaching "a lack of manhood" in acquiescing in communist aggression, a trend he found most pronounced "among the ruling and intellectual elites."

Solzhenitsyn's speech, which might have been an opening wedge into closed minds, only made some Americans stamp their feet in irritation. It was much easier to conclude that he was wrong than to admit that we had abandoned Vietnam because of our own cowardice. So his speech provoked a firestorm of condemnation in the media, led by First Lady Rosalynn Carter, who claimed that the Russian writer had no understanding of the United States.

Though Solzhenitsyn, who had braved the death camps of the Gulag Archipelago and the interrogations of the Soviet secret police in his quest for the truth, hardly needed to burnish his character as a brave man by speaking the truth in Harvard Yard, the speech did prove to be the turning point in his public reputation in this country. Because of his many unfashionable conclusions, the mainstream media decided that he was a crank, so the man who had been lionized in American literary circles was thenceforth shut out, dismissed, and ignored. A host of ignorant charges were made against him, while his message to Americans was buried and forgotten. Harper and Row, which published the address in a little book with the Russian text on one side and the English translation on the other, allowed it to go out of print by the late 1980s.

The antipathy of the media toward Solzhenitsyn was long-lasting and still has not let up. When he returned to Russia in 1994, they hastened to conclude that he was just as irrelevant in his own country as they had deemed him to be in ours. As *A World Split Apart* makes clear in its lucid discussion of the media in Western countries, they are not open to unfashionable arguments. Their reaction to the speech was predictable, and in effect Solzhenitsyn's speech predicts it, at least in broad outline. Thus, the speech was more than a reproach, from a friendly but frank observer, of America's loss of courage: It was a demonstration of courage by the Russian writer, whose speech was also a deed.

Solzhenitsyn's example of courage in the speech had a practical effect. The complacency of the media was not the only opinion abroad in the land. Among American students of foreign affairs, and also the general public, there was a widespread and justified apprehension

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by the late 1970s that our loss of courage had left the United States at risk. The war in Afghanistan, pursued in sharp contrast with the former caution of the Soviet Union, was one sign of danger; another was the impudent seizure of American hostages by the Iranian revolutionaries. The 1980 presidential election, which turned on the difference between these two opinions about America's place in the world, marked an important turn in our politics.

In the decade after Solzhenitsyn spoke, American courage played a vital part in the collapse of the Soviet Union—the most astonishing political event in the lifetime of my generation. The stiffening of American resolve after the humiliations of the 1970s had many manifestations, but it was personified in the presidency of Ronald Reagan, whom Solzhenitsyn publicly praised. From the beginning of his administration, Reagan showed courage unknown to his predecessor. His prompt decision to fire air traffic controllers engaged in an illegal strike caused Americans and foreigners alike to take notice. Even more important was the way he acted when he was shot in the spring of 1981: We saw courage in his jokes, and nothing made him more formidable. His subsequent willingness to call the Soviet Union an "evil empire" instead of falling back on the usual diplomatic euphemisms, and his evident resolve to prevent that country from achieving worldwide hegemony, made a deep impression on his countrymen, on their allies, and also on the Soviets.

By the time Solzhenitsyn returned to Russia, of course, the "world split apart" that he had described in his speech had been transformed by the American victory in the Cold War, which culminated in the fall of the Soviet Union. The tense bipolar world of two superpowers, each representing a different moral and political understanding of man, had been replaced by the uneasy—and sometimes unacknowledged—triumph of liberal democracy. Russia returned to the sort of remedial aspiration for democracy that held sway before its government was hijacked by communists during the Great War, while the United States greeted its own dominance with the sort of absentminded modesty that comes over it when it is not at war.

The sudden demise of the Soviet Union, like the fall of Saigon, was only the culmination of a long series of events, many of them little noticed or understood at the time. The Soviet Union fell after its rulers realized that communism, which always left the Russian empire at a moral and economic disadvantage, could not keep up with technological progress in the free nations of the world. That realization, which became widespread among well-placed Russians in the 1980s, made them lose heart about continuing their long-standing war of nerves with the United States.

It is not given to human beings to know the future, so we cannot be sure that the changes in the Soviet Union are irreversible, dramatic as their effects already have been in many parts of the world. Powerful politicians who cleave to communism and prefer the old regime now control important offices in Russia and are bidding for the presidency. The picture also is mixed in many of the former Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe. Cuba and North Korea remain unbending, though increasingly isolated in their backwardness. China and Vietnam have begun to modernize their economies by taking some small steps toward a free market, but without dismantling communist tyranny. In China's case, the transition has been accompanied by an unwelcome belligerency toward the interests and friends of the United States. Therefore, the post-Cold War world calls for continuing resolve and prudence on our part, not relaxation or inattention.

But there is plenty of evidence in *A World Split Apart*—and much more in Solzhenitsyn's other writings on human nature and politics—that the Russian writer considers courage important not only as an aid to preserving a decent regime, which it has been for the United States, but also as a virtue that belongs to a properly ordered human soul. Thus, courage is

prized for its own sake as well as for its instrumental effects. When Solzhenitsyn reproached us for losing heart, he meant to make us ashamed, not just afraid.

What is courage? Ernest Hemingway described it as "grace under pressure." John Milton wrote that a man who had it would "never... submit or yield." Solzhenitsyn's predecessor as an honorary American citizen, Winston Churchill, esteemed it "the first of human qualities"—in fact, the one that guarantees all the others. In his youth, he sought to win a reputation for courage. He tells us in his autobiography *My Early Life* how, after he left the military academy at Sandhurst, he carried out a private experiment by attaching himself to a Spanish column fighting a guerrilla war in Cuba. Before he got too far into his career as a cavalry officer, he wanted to find out if he had courage enough. On his 21st birthday, he came under fire for the first time and was relieved to discover that not everyone gets killed, or even hurt. The young Churchill escaped unscathed, thanks to a well-fed Spanish officer who was asleep in a hammock between him and the enemy guns. He did not begrudge the fat man his meals. Keeping the example of his unofficial trial of courage in Cuba in mind, we can discern a few capital facts about it.

Courage has to do with braving dangers nobly. It means surmounting the fear of wounds or death. In his autobiography, Churchill tells us how he gave up a piece of skin from his forearm to seal the wound of a brother officer. A brave man can endure the prospect of bodily pain or violent death, or even the reality of it, without flinching. But the danger that he knows how to face has to have something of nobility in it: Courage is shown in surmounting your fear of being hurt or killed not through illness or a car accident, but through war. Therefore, courage is seen more in Churchill's being under fire than in his willingness to be flayed by the doctor to help his wounded friend, though as a brave man he faced both kinds of pains well. This endurance, which is really just doggedness, is an important part of courage and distinguishes someone who has the virtue from someone who does not have it.

It was Aristotle who invented the distinction between intellectual virtue and moral or ethical virtue, arguing that courage was one of the moral virtues, along with moderation, magnanimity, justice, veracity, and others. He showed us that, like other moral virtues, courage is a habit, not an opinion or a frame of mind. It is not enough simply to praise courage, or even to understand it. To develop a habit like courage, you need chances to practice it. Hence Churchill's eagerness to put himself in harm's way: You can't act courageously without having dangers to face, and you can't cultivate a habit of courage without acting courageously.

Aristotle argued that, again like other moral virtues, courage is found in a mean, in between an excess and a defect. The courageous man is not too afraid of dangers, like a coward, nor is he too unafraid of them, like a rash man. Of the two extremes, the ordinary human bent is toward cowardice, because people have a natural disinclination to suffer pain or death—a disinclination that is perfectly reasonable. But rashness is a vice as well, because the rash man lacks the steadiness and the prudence of the courageous man. Churchill acted rashly when he jumped off a bridge just after his 18th birthday to avoid being captured by his brother and a cousin, who were chasing him. He fell 29 feet to the ground, ruptured his kidney among other organs, and for a year afterward "looked at life round a corner." But rashness can be turned toward courage by age and experience more easily than cowardice can.

If wanting to avoid pain or death is perfectly reasonable, then courage, which puts you in harm's way, seems to have something in common with stupidity. Churchill admits as much when he says of his trip to Cuba, "You might call it tomfoolery. To travel thousands of miles with money one can ill afford, and get up at four o'clock in the morning in the hope of get-

ting into a scrape in the company of perfect strangers, is hardly a rational proceeding." Being virtuous is supposed to be pleasant, yet courage requires you to stand your ground tenaciously even when the consequence may be pain or death. A brave man will sometimes charge into the enemy line, but a horse never will. A horse is smart enough to shy away, and men often shy away too. Hence Hobbes's notorious description of a battle as a running away on one side—or both.

Nonetheless, Churchill knew "there were very few subalterns in the British Army who would not have given a month's pay" to share his adventure. A courageous man does not just run away from battle. He is willing to risk danger because, for him, avoiding pain and staying alive are not the most important things. Everyone prefers to stay alive, of course; but the courageous man gives even his own life the proper weight: not too little and not too much. He isn't willing to pay any price just to stay alive, because he isn't willing to live just any kind of life. He knows that everyone dies in the end, so what matters is the kind of life you live. The price you pay to stay alive is too high if it means your life is not fully human; and a life of comfortable self-preservation is not a fully human life, because it lacks risk and adventure. In addition to the endurance or tenacity—the doggedness—that I mentioned earlier, courage involves daring. The courageous man dares, and dares greatly, like Churchill, who as a young man took risks over and over again to get to the battlefield, and then took risks on the battlefield to win a name for valor.

Here is a clue as to why he ranked courage first among the virtues. For human beings, living means taking risks, because we are neither omniscient or omnipotent. If we knew everything that was going to happen to us ahead of time, we could foresee and forestall injury and perhaps even death, but then life would be dull and not worth living. Or, if we had the power to master everything, we could overcome even dangers that we could not foresee, which again would give us the conceit of absolute assurance and a very humdrum life. Churchill explores these possibilities in his essay "A Second Choice," published in *Thoughts and Adventures*.

This idea of becoming omniscient or omnipotent is the real aspiration of modern science —mastering nature, overcoming chance, learning to control our surroundings, taking the risk out of life by making it entirely predictable. For Churchill, this aspiration is misbegotten, as he suggests in some of the other essays in *Thoughts and Adventures*. Insofar as science succeeds in mastering nature—and Churchill is impressed with the success of modern technology—it adds to our power, but without making us better or happier. As fast as we embrace the fruits of modern science, we find that the guarantee of a good life is still somewhere around the next corner. And when men reach the limits of their ability to control the world—for Churchill concludes that there are limits to our science and power, particularly when it comes to reshaping human nature—then they may realize ruefully that what nature gives us is not so bad after all, compared to what we make for ourselves. Indeed, that realization may prove a relief.

We do not have the kind of comprehensive knowledge that would allow us to avoid every wrong turn, but we can have a human wisdom that allows us to see a little way ahead, if we are prudent. And we do not have the kind of absolute power that would allow us to overcome every obstacle and accomplish every wish, but we do have the human strength to make a better life for ourselves, if we act wisely. Discernment is needed to guide our actions; that is the intellectual side. But courage is the moral equipment we need to live in an uncertain world without letting ourselves be either reduced to malleable material directed from without (a cowardly surrender of our humanity) or seduced by the idea that human beings can control everything (a rash attempt to play God).

Modern science leads men into both mistakes by considering us at once as material beings undifferentiated from the rest of nature and as rational beings radically distinct from the rest of nature. A more suitable and courageous posture is suggested by Aristotle, who found no mean part for men with the moral virtues (and no one who has read Aristotle will fault me for any originality in my treatment of courage, unless I have made any mistakes). Winston Churchill's discoveries about courage are remarkably similar to Aristotle's treatment of that virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Churchill was aware of this similarity, but he did not consider it a coincidence. When someone recommended Aristotle's book to him and then asked Churchill what he thought after he had read it, the answer he got was that Aristotle's views on ethics were very sensible, but not very different from those that Churchill had formed on his own.

Courage is always a popular virtue, but especially in wartime, when it seems so obviously needed. A coward is no use to others in case of danger, whereas everyone hopes to find a brave man fighting shoulder to shoulder at his side. But courage is not useful only on the battlefield: It also is a good sign that a person is worth befriending. One who prizes his own comfort and life above everything else is too selfish to be a friend to anyone else. Churchill mentions that, in his youth, men who had been in battle had an aura about them that was recognized by the girls they courted. In this, the girls showed a nice understanding of what was good for them, since a coward is too selfish to give much consideration to anyone else—even his own wife or family.

But a courageous man is not courageous simply because he seeks the esteem of others. While that aspiration is a healthy spur to a young man learning to be courageous, it cannot be the motive of a man who has courage. A courageous man does not sacrifice his own pleasure as he does courageous deeds, though he may sacrifice his own comfort; he takes pleasure in acting courageously, even if he has to endure pain. The pain, or the risk of death, is a reminder that human beings are not all souls, that we live in bodies and are vulnerable through them. It is also the reason that courage, as the first of the virtues, is on a lower level than others, like friendliness and wittiness, that do not require us to suffer pain.

Aristotle reserves courage, and the rest of the virtues as well, for gentlemen who have been properly raised. But Churchill, though he does not turn up his nose at gentlemanliness, seems to encourage young men of spirit wherever he finds them. He calls his autobiography *My Early Life* "a tale of youthful endeavour," dedicates it "to a new generation," and in it exhorts young men "all over the world" to take their places "in life's fighting line." He tells them that they should never "take No for an answer" and "Never submit to failure."

Churchill's autobiography, which is still in print, is an adventure story that rivals for color, incident, and vivid description the best stories of Mark Twain, whom he admired. Churchill would approve of the study of his own life as a spur to ambition, a guide to political judgment, and a model of courage, just as he studied and learned from the examples of his father Lord Randolph Churchill and his great forebear John Churchill, the first duke of Marlborough.

But Churchill is not the only one who can teach us courage. Solzhenitsyn's books hold lessons for us too, especially his most impressive book, the three-volume *Gulag Archipelago*, which opens a whole new moral universe to the unsuspecting Western reader. Beginning with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the only one of his books that was published in communist Russia, Solzhenitsyn explored the question of what gives a human being strength to live a virtuous life under the most unpromising conditions. *The Gulag Archipelago* affords a lengthier description of the men who discovered their souls under the bleak and

distant sun of the Soviet death camps. One of the merits of Solzhenitsyn's account is to show how that courage cannot quite stand alone as a moral virtue, that it needs to be paired with prudence. Aristotle had come to the same conclusion.

And if we are looking for American heroes, some of the same discoveries may be made from reading the memoir written by our highest-ranking Vietnam POW, Admiral Jim Stockdale, and the woman who staunchly waited and worked for his return, Sybil Stockdale. Stockdale is a man of remarkable thoughtfulness, a careful student of philosophers like Plato and Epictetus. He had plenty of time to think as he endured privation and torture in the Hanoi Hilton. The book he wrote with his wife, *In Love and War*, tells the story of his captivity from both sides. Both endurance and daring, and the way these two elements of courage have to be guided by practical wisdom, can be learned from the Stockdales' book.

At first blush, Solzhenitsyn's warning that Americans might lack courage to prevail over the Soviets now seems too pessimistic. The United States is the only remaining superpower: The Soviet Union lies in the dust. American steadiness won the Cold War, though my generation has never experienced a hot war worldwide. Still, we have only to go back to the Gulf War to remember how the United States formed ranks against a nasty aggressor. Though few Americans were called on to make sacrifices in that war, our experience in Korea, or in the two world wars, suggests our countrymen will not shrink from fighting to defend liberty. In retrospect, Vietnam looks like an exception—not that our soldiers, sailors, and airmen were loath to put themselves in harm's way, or the American people (with some sorry exceptions) to support them; but our political leaders lacked steady resolve to guide them and to explain the war to their fellow citizens.

Up to this point, I have emphasized courage in battle or in other situations of mortal danger. That is a necessary corrective to the penchant today to prefer so-called moral courage, or the courage of your convictions, to real courage. People who have the courage of their convictions, which means sincerity and a certain determination, have the strength of soul required for all the virtues, but not necessarily the particular moral habit of courage. Voltaire is famous for saying that though he might disagree with what you said, he would defend to his death your right to say it. For this sort of remark, he is widely praised for having moral courage. But as Harvey Mansfield points out, that is not courage at all, but only cheap talk. Voltaire never defended to the death anyone's right to say anything, much less something with which he disagreed; and it is doubtful that anyone ever has.

Since the decision to end the draft for American citizens, most of our young people have no experience of military service or the possibility of risking their lives for their country. This deprives them of the usual way of learning about courage in practice. But I do not mean to suggest that if you have no chance to go into battle, you cannot have courage. That virtue belongs not only on the battlefield, but also in the peaceable lives of citizens and statesmen. There is reason to be apprehensive about the courage of Americans today, from the man in the street right up to the White House. Students are more likely to know about George Washington's false teeth than his courage as a general and statesman, and shoppers do not even remember whose birthday "Presidents' Day" once celebrated. Public schools aim to make students fit in or to give them a specious self-esteem rather than teach them examples of the virtues, and courage is one of the most neglected.

Stigmatized as aggressive behavior by people who are hostile to anything noble, courage is treated with suspicion if it ever comes up; but mostly, the politically correct curriculum simply avoids mentioning it. The kind of challenging, competitive, or warlike occasions that call forth courage are neither studied nor experienced in the classroom. By giving up any effort to instruct students in moral virtues like courage, public schools discourage them. The

student who has faced exacting expectations from a teacher is a rare bird, easily recognizable by the unusual demands of his self-respect; but mostly, little is asked and little is learned. Unambitious, unaccomplished, unenterprising students make half-hearted scholars, but they also are ill-prepared for life and make an easy mark for the engrossing distractions of alcohol, drugs, and television stupor.

Yet when you neglect the spirited part of students' souls, they do not just atrophy. High aspirations remain, and students learn courage, if they do, in their increasingly risky unofficial dealings with each other and the world. Too many of them are punished for their courage if they stand up to gang violence; others learn to act courageously in the bosom of a gang on behalf of a bad cause. Public schools and the media maintain a conspiratorial silence about the prevalence of gang violence. Parents do not want to believe it and too often are oblivious to the problem, but students know all about it.

Students today seem starved for good examples, for some relief from the public school professionalism that chills their ardent curiosity about the right way to live and denies them the kind of rousing adventures that appealed to young Winston Churchill. Teachers who love their subjects and hold students to high standards, academic contests with winners and losers, conversations in class that give students a chance to explore their own questions with the help of classic writings—these traditional methods could bring some excitement back into the classroom. Students would be as encouraged to see dumbed-down, mealy-mouthed textbooks replaced with real books as to see dumbed-down, mealy-mouthed facilitators replaced with real teachers.

The long-run effects of neglecting courage go beyond our schools to civil society, where a parallel professionalism makes courts ineffective at maintaining civil order. In our political leaders, lack of courage manifests itself, as Churchill observed, in living "in the temperamental atmosphere of a Gallup Poll—always feeling one's pulse and taking one's temperature." The politics of meeting the demands of your constituents, of pleasing an often uninstructed public, of changing your stance to get re-elected—in short, what you might call the politics of valetudinarianism—is rampant today (not that cautious compromise is always wrong, or a shift in position always the sign of a craven politician).

But Churchill warns that that sort of politician is increasingly common in our democratic age. As usual, he reflects on this subject in his writings. As he writes in "Fifty Years Hence," an essay published in *Thoughts and Adventures*, "Democratic governments drift along the line of least resistance, taking short views, paying their way with sops and doles and smoothing their path with pleasant-sounding platitudes." That's a good description of presidential politics today. Few of our politicians understand Churchill's remark that "politics is almost as exciting as war and quite as dangerous" because "in war you can only be killed once, but in politics many times." Most of them are too timid to risk being killed politically even once.

In his essay on "Consistency in Politics" in *Thoughts and Adventures*, Churchill explores his view of political courage. He deprecates the small-souled kind of consistency that means unbending adherence to a certain position, no matter what the circumstances; circumstances change, so positions have to change too. A larger consistency means that a man has "the same dominating purpose," as he writes, even if circumstances force him to throw his weight now on one side, now on the other of a durable political controversy. For instance, it is impossible to say in principle whether defense spending should be higher or lower; it is only possible to make a practical judgment about what the current situation requires, which may change from one year to the next.

But, as his countrymen would discover in the 1930s when he began his brave but lonely campaign to warn them of the Nazi menace, Churchill had no time for the kind of politician who simply swims with the current. Such a timid policy neglects a statesman's responsibility as custodian of his nation's abiding interests. Representative government requires a certain courage in its statesmen: the courage to show constituents their true interests instead of just reflecting their wishes. Americans citizens need that kind of instruction as much as their political leaders need the political courage and discernment to offer it.

When Solzhenitsyn explored the reason for resistance to Soviet tyranny in the third volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*, he found it in the courage of some human beings who had, as he said, "a nobler conception of life." Courage is the virtue that defends our liberty; it is also the first virtue of a man who is truly free. Therefore, it belongs, in the company of the other moral virtues, with what Russell Kirk finely described as "the permanent things."

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