

Doing the Right Thing has Costs!
Posted On:December 31, 1969

John F. Kennedy's Profiles in Courage provided us with the biographies of men who defied political currents and made decisions that were right, but cost them dearly. One of the most dangerous political acts was Abraham Lincoln's push for the abolition of Black slavery. He paid with his life.

Today, all sorts of norms of decency are being violated, from the presidency down. Officials lie, casually violate their own professed beliefs, and fight off any press attempts to get at truth. A congressman who was a pious opponent of abortion was caught on e-mail demanding that his pregnant mistress abort the pregnancy to spare him embarrassment. Happily, he got caught and had the good graces to resign from office.

The Republican Party, long supporters of "family values" and "decency," are mute when the president that heads their party is being sued by a porno film star who is no longer willing to keep silent. She is just one of many more out there who will now come forward. Mr. Trump's once upright supporters cannot say that they didn't know the behavior of the man they elected. He was heard on tape bragging about his ability to do whatever he wanted to women "because he was a star." They voted for him anyway.

The hypocrisy over private behavior is not new; several past presidents behaved in ways that would have been found scandalous had not the times been different. When most of the press were men, there was a gentlemen's agreement to consider private behavior out of bounds by the press. John F. Kennedy was the last president to be spared such exposure. After him, more women entered press ranks and all bad behavior was fair game for public exposure.

As much as I abhor sexual bad behavior of leaders, far more dangerous are other behaviors that can have ramifications on our entire world. Scorn for norms and hostility toward institutions such as the judiciary, law enforcement, and press freedom are far more dangerous. Presidents such as Andrew Jackson, Nixon, and Trump have used their power to punish perceived "enemies" with a vindictiveness that is stunning. Firing an FBI official with 21 years of dedicated service to this country within hours of his lawful retirement is nothing less than vicious, depriving him of his retirement funds.

A momentous example of a few individuals who dared to defy all-powerful institutions can be seen in Robert Harris's An Officer and a Spy. France had lost a war with Germany in 1870, a humiliation that made the French military paranoid and vindictive. In 1894, they intercepted communications between someone in the French officer corps and the Germans: a traitor and spy. The list of likely suspects was reduced to one man, the only Jewish officer in the army, Alfred Dreyfus. Because the case against him was thin, "evidence" had to be cooked up and the military court conducted the trial illegally and in secret. Dreyfus was publicly humiliated and sent to a desert island in the Caribbean where he rotted for five years.

A young colonel, newly appointed to head the intelligence service, discovered the false incriminating evidence and tried to get a new trial for Dreyfus. The senior military, up to the Minister of War, dug in, warning the colonel to back off. He refused, was imprisoned, drummed out of the army, humiliated in the press, and deprived of his pension. He continued to pursue justice for Dreyfus, despite a horrific eruption of anti-Semitism sweeping France.

Dreyfus was eventually cleared of the crime, restored to his family, and to his rank in the army. The colonel, who paid so much for doing the right thing, was also pardoned, restored to the army, and appointed as the new Minister of War. What made this happen was a new French election that put in power people who believed in justice and democratic institutions.

Democracies fail without a free press, independent judiciary, courageous congress that puts country before party, and a civilian-run army. We need some portraits in courage right now. The 2018 election may save us.

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