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Crucible Essay

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Rights of the Individual

In America, if rights of the individual and the liberties of the whole are to be preserved, then the responsibilities that these rights entail must be respected as well. Much of what we make constitutes our rights as citizens and the human rights of any person, but what of our responsibilities? If there is no common good served when the rights of the many are wielded over the rights of the individual, the rights of the individual become empty virtues when these same individuals fail to understand and act on the responsibilities these rights require.

We are witnessing in recent generations more individual freedoms globally as defined by property rights and the access to expression and information created by media. Yet those rights and freedoms are jeopardized by routine failures to live up to the responsibilities of the individuals globally and in free societies. Despite the fact that democracy dates back to 5th century B.C. Athens, the daily news of recent months and years demonstrates that even after two and a half millennia, human rights are at risk. Examples abound in Syria, Pakistan, Uganda, Russia and China of the most basic of human rights are denied. The definition of the common good in these types of countries is made to have very few in power. Mullahs, tribal elders, tyrants and communist party officials violently determine the “common good” based on their fundamental religion, adhering to traditions of honor killings, denying education to young women, discrimination against homosexuality or free speech. While there is a desire to be free, there is no shared sense of responsibility to protect the same freedom for others in their society.

But what of free societies where individual rights are supposed to be cherished most by constitutions and bills of rights? The United States was built on the precepts of inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for each man, as stated by John Locke, a well respected and widely known philosopher. The rights of the individual are the essential factor that makes American society prosperous. Do the laws of democracy guarantee individual rights? In a letter to James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, wrote that "A democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where 51 percent of the people may take away the rights of the other 49" (Bill of Rights). The American founders, as well as philosophers before them and advocates for human rights up to today, knew well that individual rights have to come first. It is no mistake that the first ten amendments in the U.S. Constitution, later written by Madison, all address the rights of the individual. They also knew it wasn't enough to write them on parchment. The protection of these rights in any society requires an informed citizenry who votes, who cares deeply about defending the least within the society. It requires individuals willing to protect the rights of others both domestically and abroad.

The Bill of Rights requires voters to be knowledgeable of their rights, and to be careful to protect those rights. Through this, the people will be able to preserve their rights from people who want to corrode them. Human history has consistently shown that when the rights of all individuals are protected, the rights of the group are assured. To the contrary, only in rare exceptions has the common good been served when the powers that be determine the interests of the many outweigh the rights of the individual. From the Athens of 500 B.C. to the fields of Runnymede, rights of the individual grew. The only time in human history that the common good has been served and served well is when the rights of the individual are not only detailed,

but held up as the most sacred rights in that society. Giving rights to the individual puts a sense of security into the public, creating a more stable nation, protecting its citizens against the abuse of power by the few. The common good is best served when protecting the rights of the individual.

Humans are creatures of greed. Power-thirsty animals that will do anything for the upper hand. The author C.S. Lewis once wrote in *God in the Dock* “Of all tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies” (292). A more in-depth allegory of the Bolshevik Revolution can be found in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, the pigs and the other farm animals kill the farmer in search of freedom and asserting their common rights. Soon after the pigs take it upon themselves to order the other animals around for what is supposed to be the common good. The rights of each animal here disappear with what is best for the group. Orwell warns the reader through his novel about the danger of placing power in the hands of a few to create rights for the majority of the population. During the Soviet Union, the common good only benefited party members and their leaders. Without the protection of the rights of the least individual, there is an abuse of power.

Preference to the common good, in the end, takes away from the stability of a nation. While Russian population under Soviet rule toiled in fear to provide for the common good, lack of property rights and work in the pursuit of happiness led to poverty and failures to provide for the most basic needs like food and clothing.

People act out of self interest. In *the Crucible* by Arthur Miller, the court is more focused on the common good as opposed to the individual on trial. This leads to false accusing, countless

arrests, and 20 executions. The judge, being more concerned of what the townspeople will think, gave each defender the option of confessing to the impossible crime of being a witch or being sentenced to hanging. The common rights of the individual in American society today, such as the right to fair and speedy trial and the right to a defense, are blatantly ignored by the judge in order to appease the common good (Miller). This begs the question, how good is the common good, if it is leading a population into mass hysteria and sanctioned murder like it is in *the Crucible*. And what of the responsibility for those who witnessed what was taking place? If the rights of the accused individuals were respected and the responsibility to speak up and act were taken up by those who stood by picked up by in this story, lives would have been saved and the precedents of false justice would have been prevented. While Miller's story comes well before the Bill of Rights, they would have been well versed with the Magna Carta which came over 450 years prior to Salem in the 1690's.

The modern issue that Miller wished to address was the governmental violation of individual rights during the Red Scare of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950's. The familiar elements of a cunning, powerful authority creating fear and hatred towards someone who is seemingly different coupled with a majority who remain silent and fail in their responsibility to speak up results in one accused after another being sent into Congressional hearings to be destroyed. The irony in each case is that the ideals that the antagonist hopes to uphold are utterly destroyed in the process of voiding the concept of the individual's rights. In retrospect does a society or a people that is not willing to accept their responsibility to speak up deserve the rights that are supposed to be guaranteed and unalienable?

Citations

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