

The Virtues of “Cowardice” and “Betrayal,” and an Appreciation for Genuine Progress

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

In every movement there are moderates and radicals, “responsible” leaders and militants, etc. During the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King was considered to be a responsible leader. However, Malcolm X and other Black militants considered King and his passive resistance strategy to be soft, weak, cowardly, etc. In his “Message to the Grass Roots,” Malcolm explicitly condemned King and his “cohorts” as “religious Uncle Toms.” The more militant leaders believed that the mainstream leaders were achieving some superficial gains, but that they were not making any genuine progress.

Ironically, many Whites, including the President of the United States (POTUS), believed that King and his followers were moving too quickly, and that they needed to cool down. King responded by saying that if you cool down too much, you’ll just wind up in “a deep freeze.”

In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton put “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) into effect, thereby allowing LGBT people to remain in the military as long as they remained in the closet. Many progressives considered this to be an insulting and cowardly move on Clinton’s part. However, the move eventually led to President Obama’s decision to end the ban on LGBT people in the military. To many, this looks like progress on a grand scale. However, some LGBT people believe it is no big deal because married LGBT military members still do not get many of the benefits extended to married heterosexual military members.

Before Obama ended the ban against LGBT people in the military, many accused him of being dishonest about where he truly stood on the issue of same-sex marriage. Especially during the earlier years of his first term, he said that he was struggling with the idea that marriage should be between a man and a woman. However, prior to his first run for the presidency, he admitted that he supported same-sex marriage. To many, this kind of flip-flopping appears to be cowardly. To others, it is politically astute. After all, it led to an ultimate prize - greatly increased public support for same-sex marriage.

Today, a small minority of Americans support same-sex marriage. This seems highly remarkable, especially considering that, not long ago, most people were still debating whether same-sex civil unions should be legal. Now, even many raving homophobes approve of civil unions, though they still vigorously oppose same-sex marriage. Moreover, many reactionary religionists concede that life partners in same-sex unions deserve certain benefits, such as the right to make hospital visits to their sick or dying partners. Again, this is a highly remarkable turn of events.

There is now a move among the leaders of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) to drop the ban on gays. Specifically, various religious and civic groups that sponsor scouts would have the right to determine whether to accept or reject gays. Not surprisingly, some believe that this is a cowardly step to take, and that there should be a complete lifting of the ban. Others believe that this could be a major step forward that could lead to the complete lifting of the ban over time.

As the result of a sensationalized brutal gang rape, India has improved its laws on sexual assault. According to a story in *The Washington Post*:

In particular, India's rape law has been changed to allow for stiff penalties for all types of sexual assault. In the past, rape was defined as penetration only, and anything short of that fell under the category of criminal assault on a woman with "intent to outrage her modesty," an offense that carried a light penalty and was almost never enforced. That left women vulnerable to constant groping on public transport, for example, by men who knew they could never be prosecuted.

Separate offenses with strict punishments have been introduced for stalking, voyeurism, stripping a woman or carrying out an acid attack. For the first time, sex trafficking has been outlawed in India, with stiff penalties both for the trafficker and someone employing people who have been trafficked. ("India tightens laws on sex attacks, trafficking in wake of gang rape," *The Buffalo News*, February 4, 2013, p. 4.)

Not everyone saw this as good news. Women's groups in India opposed President Pranab Mukherjee's signing of the bill into law because it did not accept all of the reform committees recommendations. Indeed, the women opposing the bill accused the government of betraying the Indian people.

One of the most difficult facts of life for many people to understand is that genuine social, political and economic progress usually occurs at a glacial pace, or at least in decades, generations or centuries, as opposed to days, weeks, months, or a few years. Many impatient people contend that "nothing has changed" simply because the changes they are seeking have not all occurred over night.

The late Andy Rooney once made a paradoxical statement. He said, "Patience is a virtue. So is impatience." We should never lower our standards, and we should always strive for genuine progress. Moreover, we should remember that, as Mark Twain pointed out, "the radical of one century is the conservative of the next."

However, we should be wary about questioning the courage of those who are leading struggles for the betterment of human civilization. After all, many of those alleged cowards, such as Martin Luther King, made the ultimate sacrifice by laying down their lives. (Others were beaten, tortured, imprisoned, etc.) Furthermore, a key factor in attaining happiness is appreciating how good we actually have it, how much worse it could be, and how much worse it *used* to be.

Sometimes there is a very thin line between cowardice and astute judgment. It is often necessary to navigate turbulent social and political waters. Sometimes compromise is necessary. Sometimes relatively safe, carefully planned strategies are necessary.

Although we might not have made as much progress as we would have liked, there is no shame or weakness in acknowledging that we have made progress or even positive change. In the words of James Weath, "Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans."

Indeed, the struggle for human liberation never ends. However, that should never prevent us from enjoying and appreciating the progress bequeathed to us by those that have done the best they could with what they had.