



# The Hero in Our Time

by Clarence Thomas

When I was young, there was a deep appreciation of heroes and heroic virtue. Art, literature, and even popular culture often focused on people who demonstrated heroic virtues—courage, persistence, discipline, hard work, humility and triumph in the face of adversity. These building blocks of self-reliance were replicated and reinforced at home, school, and church. Nearly everyone who attended grammar school in the 1950s or earlier can remember a favorite account of the integrity and work ethic of George Washington, or of Abraham Lincoln, or of George Washington Carver, or even of some baseball or football legend. It seemed that we all had heroes—not role models, a term of far more recent vintage. Indeed, it would have been odd for a child of several decades ago not to have had a hero.

But today, our culture is far less likely to raise up heroes than it is to exalt victims—individuals who are overcome by the sting of oppression, injustice, adversity, neglect, or misfortune. Today, victims of discrimination, racism, poverty, sickness, and societal neglect abound in the popular press. Today, there are few (if any) heroes. Often, it seems that those who have succumbed to their circumstances are more likely to be singled out than those who have overcome them.

This pattern of ignoring and deconstructing heroes stems from the rise of radical egalitarianism. In the 1960s, many of the cultural elite saw a need to ensure absolute equality. On this view, differences in ability and level of achievement are random or uncontrolled, and to permit these characteristics to dic-

tate human happiness and well-being would be unfair. Denigrating heroic virtue fits quite well with the notion that we must all be the same and that there can be no significant differences in our achievement, social standing, or wealth.

Our culture today discourages, and even at times stifles, heroic virtues—fortitude, character, courage, a sense of self-worth. For so many, the will, the spirit, and a firm sense of self-respect and self-worth have been suffocated. Many in today's society do not expect the less fortunate to accept responsibility for (and overcome) their present circumstances. Because they are given no chance to overcome their circumstances, they will not have the chance to savor the triumph over adversity. They are instead given the right to fret and complain, and are encouraged to avoid responsibility and self-help. This is a poor substitute for the empowering rewards of true victory over adversity. One of my favorite memories of my grandfather is how he would walk slowly by the corn field, admiring the fruits of his labor. I have often thought that just the sight of a tall stand of corn must have been more nourishing to his spirit than the corn itself was to his body.

As victim ideology flourishes, more and more people begin to think that they must claim victim status to get anywhere in this world. Indeed, is it any surprise that anyone and everyone can claim to be a victim of something these days? In his book *The Abuse Excuse*, Alan Dershowitz criticizes countless examples of conditions that "victimize" people and thereby release them from responsibility for their actions. Here are just a few examples:

- the "black rage defense," which asserts that blacks who are constantly subjected to oppression and racial injustice will become uncontrollably violent;

- "urban survival syndrome," which claims that violent living conditions justify acts of aggression in the community;

- "self-victimization syndrome," which maintains that people become less productive and creative, and become severely depressed, as a result of societal neglect and discrimination.

Most significantly, there is the backlash against affirmative action by "angry white males." I do not question a person's belief that affirmative action is unjust because it judges people based on their sex or the color of their skin. But something far more insidious is afoot. For some white men, preoccupation with oppression has become the defining feature of their existence. They have fallen prey to the very aspects of the modern ideology of victimology that they deplore.

Some critics of affirmative action, for example, fault today's civil rights movement for demanding equality yet supporting policies that discriminate based on race. These critics expect the intended beneficiaries of the civil rights regime to break away from the ideology of victimhood: to cherish freedom, to accept responsibility, and, where necessary, to demonstrate fortitude in the face of unfairness. I do not quarrel with this. But these critics should hold themselves to the same standards, resisting the temptation to allow resentment over what they consider reverse discrimination to take hold of their lives and to get the best of them. They must remember that if we are to play the victim game the very people they decry have the better claim to victim status.

Of course, de-emphasizing heroism exacerbates all these problems. Human beings have always faced the temptation to permit adversity or hate to dominate and destroy

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their lives. To counter this tendency, society had heroes—people capable of overcoming the very adversity or injustice that currently affects today's victims. They rose above their circumstances and inherent imperfections. Heroes cherished freedom, and tried to accomplish much with what little they had. Heroes demonstrated perseverance in the face of adversity and used hardship as a means to strive for greater virtue. And heroes accepted responsibility—they did what they did despite fear and temptation, and tried to do the right thing when presented with a choice between good and evil. It is awfully hard for society to inculcate these values without some useful models from the past and present.

I may not have realized it as a child, but my grandfather was a hero who had a tremendous impact on my life. He certainly would not be a celebrity by today's standards. Though barely able to read and saddled with the burdens of segregation, he worked hard to provide for his family. He was a deeply religious man who lived by the Christian virtues. He was a man who believed in responsibility and self-help. And though this could not bring him freedom in a segregated society, it at least gave him independence from its daily demeaning clutches.

In all the years I spent in my grandparents' house, I never heard them complain that they were victims. Now, they did not like segregation or think that it was right. In fact, there was no question that it was immoral and that anyone who promoted it was morally reprehensible. But there was work to be done. I assure you that I did not enjoy the demands he placed on us. I saw no value in rising with the chickens, and, unlike him, I was not obsessed with what I will call the "reverse Dracula syndrome": that is, fear that the rising sun would catch me in bed. It would not be until I was exposed to the most fortunate and best educated in our society that I would be informed that all this time I had been a victim. I am sure you can imagine what it was like when I returned home to Savannah, and informed my grandparents that with the education I had received because of their tremendous foresight and sacrifice, I had discovered our oppressed and victimized status in society. Needless to say relations were quite strained, and our vacation visits were somewhat difficult. My

grandfather was no victim and he didn't send me to school to become one.

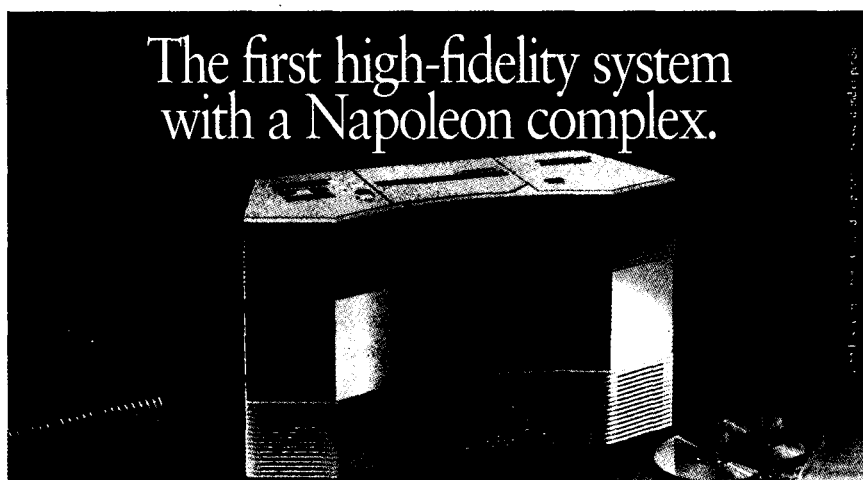
There are many people like my grandfather alive today. The cultural elite does not honor them as the heroes they are, but instead views them as people who are sadly ignorant of their victim status or who have forgotten where they came from. Our social institutions do not train today's young to view such people as heroes and do not urge them to emulate their virtues.

I am not saying that we should expect everyone to be a hero all of the time. We humans are weak by our very nature; all of us at times will permit hardship to get the very best of us. But having a set of norms to guide us and to push us along—the stuff of heroes—can be a source of great strength. If we do not have a society that honors people who make the right choices in the face of adversity—and reject the bad choices—far fewer people will make the right choices. Ultimately, without a celebration of heroic virtue, we throw ourselves into the current state of affairs, where man is a passive victim incapable of tri-

umphing over adversity and where aggression, resentment, envy and other vices thwart progress and true happiness.

What I am saying is that it requires the leadership of heroes and the best efforts of all to advance civilization and to ensure that its people follow the path of virtue. And, because of the role law has played in perpetuating victim ideology, and because of the influence law can have in teaching people about right and wrong, lawyers have a special obligation here. We should seek to pare back the victimology that pervades our law, and thereby encourage a new generation of heroes to flourish.

I am reminded of what St. Thomas à Kempis wrote more than 500 years ago about the human spirit. His standard is a useful one for *thinking* about the instruction that our law should be offering: "take care to ensure that in every place, action, and outward occupation you remain inwardly free and your own master. Control circumstances, and do not allow them to control you. Only so can you be a master and ruler of your actions, not their servant or slave; a free man..." □



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# Rooked

by Benjamin J. Stein

Wednesday

Here I am, en route to New Orleans on United Airlines. By the grace of God, I am in First Class. It's incredibly cramped and tiny. By pure chance, I am sitting across from a man named Mark Morial, who is mayor of New Orleans. He's very friendly and seems quite relaxed. Every so often, he has a talk and then a laugh with the man sitting next to me, who's a big businessman in New Orleans. I would swear that the businessman says he is involved in a casino project on the river in New Orleans with the mayor, but can that possibly be right? No, probably not.

Anyway, first class was so dim and packed that I took my little Sony Discman, the best invention since air-conditioning, and went back to coach, where it was far more spacious and brighter. As I slept peacefully listening to *Victory at Sea*, my favorite soundtrack on earth, I was awakened by a little nudge.

It was the pilot, the captain, of our ship. "Hi," he said. "I'm Al, your neighbor on Pacific View Drive. I'm the pilot."

How is that for an amazing coincidence? Actually, I have not lived on Pacific View Drive for about nine years, but I remember Al, and we had a long, pleasant talk.

A car and driver took me to my hotel in the French Quarter. I would not want to stay at that hotel again (far too dingy), but it was fine for right now. Then I hiked over one block to Bourbon Street. Wow. What a dismal spot. Really stunningly smelly, dirty, and tawdry.

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Horrible topless and bottomless men's strip clubs (men stripping) next to women's strip clubs. Many, many bars. Yuck. Very strong smell of dried vomit and horse manure. No, thanks. Not for little me.

I met Al, the pilot, for dinner at a place called Mister B's. It was excellent food and fine service. He bragged for a long time about his stock picks.

"I really like K-mart right now," he said. "It's going for about thirteen dollars a share."

"How much will it earn this year?"

"Who cares?" he answered.

"But how do you know what the stock is worth if you don't know how much it earned last year or hope it will earn this year or next?"

"I don't care. I just know that thirteen is a low number," he said amiably. Amazing. Why isn't he broke?

Then we took a cab (no one, and I mean, no one, walks in New Orleans at night—it makes D.C. seem like Idaho) a few blocks to a converted municipal auditorium where my pal DeAnne was once a debutante, and which is now a Harrah's casino.

If I were Harrah's, I might want to rethink this one. It is a dump. Dark, dirty, drab, absolutely blank. It is just a big room like a bus station with hundreds of slot machines—I never once heard one pay off—and a few dozen sad-looking women, mostly black, shoveling quarters in. Isn't the idea of a casino that it's supposed to be bright and cheery so that even if you lose your money, you still feel like you had a good time?

I went back to my large, dim room. I hooked up my laptop and started communicating. Then I re-read my speech and prepared my soul for bed. I'm here

to speak to some insurance executives, and I have to do a good job.

Thursday

I slept very late and then went over to Mister B's for lunch. A great meal of chicken livers. Yummy. Then a visit to a lovely photo gallery to look at some huge photos of swamps and woods in New England. Photography is such a great art form. Small wonder, painting is dying. Some young kids from a university in Hattiesburg recognized me and asked me for my autograph. "Your Starburst commercial is so great," a pretty young woman said.

"That's not me," I said. "That's someone imitating me."

"Well, you're great," she said. "You're a classic."

Then to a jeweler to look at a big emerald I saw in the window. Too much money for me. I can't really buy jewelry the way I used to. I have to prepare for my retirement. Years ago, I foolishly bought jewels when I should have been buying stock. Now I have to prepare for the day when no one wants me to act, and I will creep to my cabin (that I don't have yet) on Lake Pend'Oreille and spend all day remembering what it was like to live in safety in a city.

I gave my speech. It went extremely well except for one man who vigorously—and without the aid of facts—defended Fred Carr and First Executive, very bigtime Drexel players who made the vast expansion of Drexel possible by buying their bonds, with insurance policyholders' money, which then were seized and cost policyholders billions. "The bottom line," he said, "is buyer beware."