



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Introduction by Hodding Carter III

Emadeddin Baghi and Lovemore Madhuku

2004

A little over 51 years ago, a graduating senior delivered himself of his high school's valedictory address in a small Mississippi town. It was a self-congratulatory take on the subject of moral courage. Of course, the audience did not know it was self-congratulatory for the good reason that the audience did not recognize the speaker as the paragon he was describing. Over the intervening half century, I have finally overcome my embarrassment and learned to laugh, though rarely in public, about that shameless leap into self-aggrandizement.

And what does this bit of flagellation have to do with the quite wonderful occasion that draws us here, the awarding of the 2004 Civil Courage Prizes? Simply this: in the face of the ongoing horrors and repression in so many places around the globe - in the face of the harsh price our honorees have had to pay for speaking truth to power, we Americans strike courageous poses only at the risk of looking ridiculous. In the face of the examples offered by those who join us tonight, as with honorees of past years, we would do better to seek to learn at their knees rather than try to instruct. Their civil courage — their moral courage — is an inspiration to all and a rebuke to those of us who button up and batten down in the face of infinitely less lethal challenges.

What marks off their deeds most dramatically is that they occur within community. They are offered by men and women who are of community, not apart from it, who seek its improvement, not its destruction. They are the daily monuments of people who seek a better world for those with whom they live.

Their dissent is not directed at the safely removed "other," the "evil ones" who lurk in alien lands, but at the men and women who direct the affairs of their own nations. It touches evil up close and quite personally; it functions precariously, always just tiny fractions of a word or phrase away from the murderous third rail that defines the boundaries of their state's tolerance.

Nor is their dissent anonymous. In our nation, where back-shooting from cloaked ambush is the norm, that reality seems startlingly unique. We are routinely told in the United States that hard truths and passionate dissent could never be uttered were it not for the press' willingness to provide sheltering cover. The lives and acts of our honorees give the lie to that tattered fiction, a fiction that makes for lazy journalism and cowardly policy debate.

Civil courage: It is much more than a discrete act, of course, the hard charge up the hill followed by a round of drinks at the 19th hole. It is sustained action over time. It is the marathon rather than the 100-yard dash. It is commitment through the bad weeks and months and years as well as on the occasional good days.

And it is commitment maintained without illusion. Our honorees tonight have lived all their lives in societies dominated by leaders without moral scruple or meaningful legal restraint. They hope and work passionately for a better day, but they know how quickly their lives can be taken and their cause, crushed. Yet even without the comfort of faith in the inevitable march of progress, they act as though it were indeed as inevitable as it is desired. As Emadeddin Baghi, soon to be introduced in absentia as one of this year's winners, has written:

"...from the beginning, I assumed the democratic procedure has to progress millimeter by millimeter. Those who are tired and disappointed, they expected kilometers."

The current Chinese movie, *Hero*, makes a number of not very subtle cultural and political points in the course of a beautifully filmed action epic. One of them is pertinent here: All societies have heroes.

Well, yes and no. All societies celebrate those heroes who protect the official truths, the official acts, the official myths. They are rewarded with recognition and praise in their time. But this evening, with the Civil Courage Prize, we celebrate and praise a heroism — we "now praise famous men" — of a different order. The winners have confronted the tiger within the gate. They have called into question the validity of their rulers' acts and pinpointed the contradictions that separate precept from behavior. Theirs is a lonely course, one that has historically led to the stake, the firing squad or the torturer's chamber.

It is also one upon which humanity depends if evil is to be checked and the rule of law advanced. That is no small burden, and yet the winners of The Civil Courage Prize of 2004 have assumed it with grace, commitment and rare intelligence. We are enabled by the deeds of all three, saddened by the fate of one and reminded by the enforced absence of the other two how absolute is the evil with which each of them is routinely confronted.