**GAVEL GAMUT**

By Jim Redwine

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**WISE FOOLS NEEDED**

Arthur Miller’s 1953 play *The Crucible* was a metaphor for the dangers of the McCarthyism era. Senator Joseph McCarthy wielded virtually unchecked power using Red Scare tactics. Governments, the news media and the public devoured allegations that Soviet Communists had infiltrated American culture and the only solution was to excise the traitors. Thousands of careers were ruined as was the social standing of countless loyal citizens by innuendo. Senator McCarthy’s most powerful weapon was fear. Freedom of speech could have been America’s best defense, but fear of being painted with McCarthyism’s red brush kept truth at bay. As with many dangerous social problems, America’s solution had already been provided by our 18th century Founders, scholars and historians who had studied thousands of years of great civilizations that had destroyed themselves through hubris and stifled debate. Freedom of Speech is not just a shield, it is also a democratic society’s most powerful sword. To concede this ultimate right is to voluntarily disarm.

 Our Constitution was crafted by human beings who were steeped in the lessons of civilizations that had been forged on an anvil of free speech but had declined when truth could or would no longer confront power. Our Founders knew their history, especially that of the brilliant ancient Greeks who realized:

**“…democracy insisted on complete freedom of speech, and thought it well to mock the personalities and air the burning problems of the moment.”**

**Charles A. Robinson, Jr.**

**In his Introduction to**

***An Anthology of Greek Drama* (1949)**

 From Sophocles’ twenty-five-hundred-year-old *Oedipus the King* to Shakespeare’s (1564-1616) *Macbeth* and other countless examples from civilizations of old to modern times, we have warnings that leaders who do not heed voices cautioning against hubris can bring down great societies. A common theme in both monarchial government and literature for thousands of years is that of the Wise Fool who, without fear of repercussions, both whispers in the emperor’s ear and speaks truth to his or her face. In the plays of ancient Greece this role was often played by the chorus which would presage the harm a ruler’s pride was going to bring about later if he did not heed the warnings or if the populace did not replace the ruler. This is the ultimate in free expression. However, often times those in power surround themselves not with “Wise Fools” who tell them unwelcome truth, but with fearful fools who cling to power through sycophantic flattery.

 When the victims of Salem, Massachusetts were executed in 1692-1693, it was not because they were witches but because superstition, personal grudges, prejudices, ignorance or religion trumped truth. In the McCarthy era, the Red Scare did not put America in peril, the fear of it did. The cure then as always is Freedom of Expression. The disease of misguided or corrupt power is best cured by a free flow of ideas and most exacerbated by silence, or worse, capitulation. When even our universities cower into silence before threats of our government, the rotting of our moral core as a free people has taken root. We have the recent example of the 1950’s to awaken us to what silence in the face of government power run amok can wreak on our democracy. History is littered with the rubble of previously once great societies that have committed the sin of lassitude in the face of ignorance.

The voices of campus protesters in the 1960’s and 1970’s helped bring America back from the precipice during the Viet Nam War era much as the courage of those such as Arthur Miller, who refused to be silenced, did during the 1950’s Red Scare. One might ask where the prophetic and courageous Greek chorus and wise fools are today as our government sends our soldiers into our streets?

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