



# Surgeons and the spirit of liberty

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Submitted Mar 07, 2022. Accepted for publication Mar 29, 2022.

doi: 10.21037/jtd-2022-03

View this article at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.21037/jtd-2022-03>

*Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.* —John Donne (1572–1631)

Though now an American surgeon, I belong to a most fortunate generation in Europe. Born 13 years after the last World War, when scars of that catastrophe were still visible in my hometown Hamburg in northern Germany as virtually everywhere in Europe, I grew up into a peaceful age. We did not play among the ruins, and our fathers had come home from the war. Those who led Western Europe in the years of my childhood created, out of conviction or persuasion, an order with practical rules that established a spirit of liberty, described by the judge Learned Hand in 1944 to new citizens of the United States as “not too sure that it is right, seeking to understand the minds of other men and women and weighing their interests alongside its own without bias”. That same spirit allowed my generation of Germans to grow up and recognize Strasbourg under the flag of France and later the Polish city of Gdansk as part of their new European home where erstwhile fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers followed the dreams of empire to their death. With the invasion of Ukraine by Russian armed forces on February 24, 2022, to my generation the bell has tolled. War has returned to Europe's center.

Long after the rubble of bombed-out quarters had been removed, vast tracts of Hamburg still stood empty or were covered with temporary shacks when I was a child. In scenes of past and present-day Aleppo, of Grozny or Bagdad, Sarajevo, Kabul and now Kiev, I recognize the secret photographs taken immediately following aerial bombardment in 1943 of a Hamburg where in street after street only the shells of houses remained. The agony of complete destruction, crimes of war and the genocide committed by Germany a few short years before my birth remain a collective memory that bind together more than

one generation on the European continent. We may not like each other all the time, but none of us cares to return to the killing fields of that ruinous era. Those who witnessed the destructive years, now vanishing in number, were not always compelled to speak to us of a war whose lessons have nevertheless endured. Are we today condemned to return to that misery?

Why does a surgeon write about the threats to freedom in a professional journal? The field of cardiothoracic surgery like other medical disciplines has witnessed the ever-growing collaboration among widely diverse countries and cultures. In a spirit of liberty, we often consciously chose to disregard in years past each other's differences to find greener pastures in scientific debate and personal relationships during meetings, conference calls, collegial visits and private encounters. This spirit of liberty I have appreciated in every one of our meetings and conferences. Yet what we set aside in the interest of our work now suddenly occupies the center of any space where we engage, threatening to suffocate what we have come to cherish and enjoy. Are we prepared to succumb, divided as some would like us to be, to any dictator, strongman or autocrat who seeks to impose his newest 1,000-year dream on us? Russians surely deserve better representation of legitimate interests in their relationship to Ukraine than an armed invasion with an ignominious end.

We are current witness to an enormous slaughter, slow or fast, of an outmatched opponent in a deliberate and unprovoked attack of Russian armed forces on the independent country of Ukraine. Such spectacle was last observed in central Europe in 1939 when fascist Germany attacked Poland. If another version of Blitzkrieg is not executed, then because the warlord coldly calculates a greater effect in flooding the neighboring countries with millions of desperate refugees.

Either way, once again the military aspirations of a determined dictator facing countries woefully unprepared to deal with naked aggression appear limitless. Wherever we as thoracic surgeons meet, how we deal with this war will show us whether we preserve the spirit of liberty and the communal space of scientific inquiry. We may have, and may keep, our different opinions but unprovoked war and expansionist threats cannot and will not stand.

### Acknowledgments

*Funding:* None.

### Footnote

*Provenance and Peer Review:* This article was commissioned by the editorial office, *Journal of Thoracic Disease*. The article did not undergo external peer review

*Conflicts of Interest:* The author has completed the ICMJE uniform disclosure form (available at <https://jtd.amegroups.com/article/view/10.21037/jtd-2022-03/coif>). HAG serves

as an unpaid editorial board member of *Journal of Thoracic Disease*. He reports that in the past 36 months, he received consulting fees for individual case reviews from Teladoc and Advance Medical. He serves as an unpaid member of Society of Thoracic Surgeons, and an unpaid editorial board member of *The Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgeon*.

*Ethical Statement:* The author is accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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**Cite this article as:** Gaissert HA. Surgeons and the spirit of liberty. *J Thorac Dis* 2022;14(4):820-821. doi: 10.21037/jtd-2022-03