

Be Prepared... For A Revolution!

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Forget body piercing. If you want real counterculture, join the Boy Scouts.

My buddies and I were not especially scary as kids go. Not in our day- which was back when Elvis was a scandal- and certainly not by today's standards. But we hung around in tight packs, wore our colors, owned guns, and knew that life was about survival of the fittest. And our parents thought it was just fine. Encouraged it, in fact. We were, of course, Boy Scouts.

We had a Scoutmaster who had been a prisoner of the Germans in World War II and had lost his taste for routine civilian life. He sold insurance and he hated it. But he loved the woods. He showed a bunch of 10-year-old boys the basic skills illustrated in the Boy Scout manual, and when we could pitch tents, start fires, dig latrines, and the rest, we moved on to advanced stuff: How to navigate in the woods. How to purify water. How to find dinner. (We wound up eating a lot of starchy cattail roots.) We wore uniforms. We carried knives. We were trained to survive.

All those skills would come in handy over the next three decades. In the '50s, scouting saved boys like me from the boredom and aimlessness of adolescence. In the '60s and '70s, it saved some of the men we became from dying in a war on foreign soil. James "Nick" Rowe was one of those men.

Rowe managed to keep himself alive in a Vietcong Pow camp by supplementing his starvation rations with fish he caught in nets he held together with knots he had learned in the Scouts. After more than 5 years, he made one of the few successful escapes by any POW in that war. When I asked him about the skills that had helped pull him through—and which he was teaching to the Army Special Forces—he said he'd learned the basics in the Boy Scouts. "Some of that Scouting Stuff saved me" he told me.

Unfortunately, what Rowe lived to see was a growing criticism of the Scouts that began in the early '80s. First, it became merely unfashionable to put your son in the Boy Scouts. But as the decade wore on, it became utterly un-PC. Scouting was branded a bigoted organization. After all, it was opposed to letting atheists, girls, and openly gay boys join, and, especially, it didn't want openly gay men to become Scoutmasters. The militarism—the uniforms, the salutes, the ranks—was also distasteful to the '90s soccer moms who expected their sons to grow up to

be gentle, gender-sensitive soccer players. There was no merit badge for empathy. Scouts didn't go to the woods to hug trees.

Millions of boys missed out on Scouting when they might have at least had the satisfaction of being part of a unit; might have slept on the ground once or twice; might have discovered that comfort is highly overrated. Might have learned that "Be prepared" applied to more in life than carrying a condom in your wallet.

But they didn't. Which no doubt has added to America's adolescent-boy problem: utter self-absorption and indulgence—self- and otherwise.

Scouting has actually a comeback over the last few years, and the organization will tell you that it's because of the emphasis on outdoor adventure and skills. And the very conscious attempt to include some modern skills—computers and such—may also play a part, along with the fact that in these projects, conscientious parents see Scouting as a clear-cut alternative to gangs, and faithfully drag their sons to troop meetings.

But there's another, even better reason to join the Boy Scouts. These days, Scouting is not about conformity and learning to be good little automatons. Scouting is actually a kind of insurgency. The BSA's worried, image-conscious officials may not want to cop to this, but to be a Scout is an act of open defiance. Even rebellion. Scouting is not for

pigeon-chested boys with tormented souls who prefer virtual reality to the real kind.

Scouting is about being a young man. It is about straight-up acceptance of authority, and the consequent understanding that as you grow in experience and leadership, you will earn a little authority yourself. And it is, as it has always been, about competence. About learning how to sharpen an ax and perform basic first-aid—a notion, of course, that is sneered at as hopelessly quaint in this culture.

Except for this: Men and boys like to know how to do stuff—shoot a rifle, tie a bowline, read a topographic map—because we know it's better to be a master of skills than a slave to a bundle of needs and feelings. Besides, we know merit is a man's real badge of confidence and authority. It isn't something the Scouts owe you. It's something you have to earn.

