

The Wisconsin Experience

At Wisconsin Spring Conference 2003 a study on Individual Liberties (to include the Patriot Act) was proposed from the convention floor and approved with an overwhelming majority. The state study committee found the matter to be so urgent to the membership that the study was put on an expedited schedule with the study to be completed in a year rather than the usual two years. Leagues around the state began their studies by gathering pro and con information and setting up forums. The two sides were viewed as the government (Justice Department/Department of Homeland Security) on one side and those opposed to the Patriot Act on the other. As we met at Fall Issues Briefing and discussed these issues, we realized that we needed to rethink this formulation of our study.

The LWVUS position is, "The LWVUS believes in the individual liberties guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States. The League is convinced that individual rights now protected by the Constitution should not be weakened or abridged." The position had its genesis in the McCarthy years and is notable for its unequivocal support of all of our constitutionally guaranteed rights. There are no tradeoffs in the LWVUS position. Our Wisconsin study shifted focus to determining whether and which legislation weakened or abridged our individual rights and what should be done if it did. Our resources are available at the LWVWI website: <http://www.lwvwi.org/libertiesresources.htm>.

The Wisconsin study determined that our liberties had been weakened and abridged by various pieces of federal legislation. This federal legislation had more than a little potential to become unfunded mandates and restrictions for state and local government. We wanted to propose a position that would enable our state and the local leagues to act against these threats. The position on which the LWVWI reached an overwhelming consensus is, "The LWVWI believes: In the individual rights now protected by the Wisconsin Constitution. The League is convinced that the individual rights now protected by the Wisconsin Constitution should not be weakened or abridged.

That is the right and responsibility of individuals and groups to oppose by any non-violent means government actions that weaken or abridge the individual rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and the Wisconsin Constitution.

That it is the responsibility of state and local government officials to uphold their oath of allegiance to the U.S. Constitution and the Wisconsin

Constitution by protecting the individual rights of their constituents in the face of federal laws and executive orders that weaken or abridge them.

If the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, it is up to us to keep the vigil and act to preserve our freedoms when they are threatened. We began the process of developing an action plan at Spring Council after the consensus was announced. A state action committee on Individual Liberties is forming and the action agenda will be a major agenda item at Issues briefing in the Fall. Though it's been a bit lengthy I wanted to put on the table the thought process that a number of us have already been through by way of background.

The National Discussion

The National Convention voted overwhelmingly to elevate the LWVUS' positions on Individual Liberties and Citizens' Right to Know to the top priority for education and advocacy by LWVUS. It is notable that no update to the positions or study on homeland security was proposed or approved at National Convention. It is notable because LWVUS does not have a position on either terrorism or homeland security and is unable to act on those issues. The Convention vote was to elevate the priority of long standing positions, not to get sidetracked on to issues that more than merit a study in their own right. The LWVUS has already warned and begun to lobby against legislation at the federal level which weakens or abridges our liberties, but the struggle has only begun.

The question remains as to how LWVUS can implement these positions as our highest priority. The Convention declined to increase the per-member payments, a statement that clearly means the convention is expecting a reordering of priorities rather simply adding a staff person and carrying on other business as before. It was suggested that we don't currently have enough expertise at the national staff level on this issue. But the expertise needed depends on what LWVUS will be doing on this issue.

Thoughts on Formulating a National Action Plan

Our experience so far in Wisconsin has convinced me that we need a three pronged approach at all levels of the league. We can debate the causes for a long time, but I expect we can agree that the level of civic knowledge across the country is generally poor. League does not feel that our individual liberties should be weakened or abridged. We must first remind our fellow citizens of what rights we have. When our local league wanted to go the mall on law day to pass out

the Bill of Rights, it took a senior leaguer to persuade the mall manager that this was a civic moment and that supporting the constitution was a civic good.

But first he had to know what the Bill of Rights was before he came around. Reminding our neighbors of our rights is properly an education function of the league.

Once we've refreshed their civic memory, we need to further inform them of what league sees as attempts to weaken or abridge these rights. Some of us have studied the issues and know that these are not simple discussions, nor are the threats always obvious. We have our work cut out for us not only to identify all the threats with the multitude of ramifications, but to explain these to the general public and to mobilize them to take action with us.

The third prong is the action at the national, state and local levels to roll back these threats. At one of our forums the history professor was reviewing past attacks on our liberties and noting that it has always taken a grassroots effort to form the basis to roll back attacks on liberty. The grassroots can provide the "updraft" necessary to move national change spearheaded by our national organization.

A National Action Plan

We need LWVUS to take the lead on a number of things.

We need national to be on top of the national legislation and lobbying and issue action alerts in a timely fashion. National should also be assessing the impact of federal legislation on state and local governments and advising us of this information so that we can use it in our state and local education and advocacy efforts.

LWVUS needs to be part of a national level coalition working on this issue. In the unlikely event that there is already an appropriate coalition for league to join, it should join it. If there isn't an appropriate coalition, LWVUS should spearhead the creation of one. News of any national coalition partners should be passed on quickly to other levels to aid in coalition building at the state and local level.

We need a campaign for freedom/liberty at all levels of the league, a marketing ad advocacy campaign if you will. The league needs to be creative in getting our message across. Liberty is a way of life and we need to cross all sorts of the traditional boundaries in the way we say and do that. Traditional forums are great for some people. Liberty Circles for others. We can also have freedom festivals, find the old

freedom songs, have poster, poetry and short story contests, art exhibits and performance art. We can have these at the national level and up here in the rural communities. We can go to every county fair and festival and event that others put on. Liberty needs to be made fashionable once again.

Action Goals

A freedom campaign is not an end in itself. We want all legislation at any level of government that weakens or abridges our individual liberties to sunsetted or repealed. We want safeguards of our liberty to be put into place. We want to block the expenditures of money at any level of government that go to take away our freedoms. Our senior leaguers remember the McCarthy years and those of us here in Wisconsin are more than aware that the followers of McCarthy are still with us. We should not have to fight off massive attacks on our freedoms in every generation. The League is committed to making democracy work, which it cannot do without our most basic freedoms. We keep the vigil.

State and Local Action Goals

Its is up to those of us in the grassroots to get ourselves organized as our national organization gets itself organized. We here in Wisconsin think it is the right and responsibility of all of us to make the liberty bell ring across the land. We need a strong steering committee for the Liberty Caucus. We need to share all of our ideas (both successes and failures) on the LibertyList. We need some folks who will post the material developed and resources found on a web site and keep the site updated. We need materials, buttons, bumper stickers to sell for fundraisers. Ideas ready to take to a printer can be posted. We need "how-to" packets for different events that can be posted on the website for downloading. We need to see this as a shared effort that builds on its energy to keep the momentum going.

Thanks for reading this far. I look forward to your thoughts and comments

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