

The cornerstone of freedom in society is the rule of law. Law transcends the whimsy of individuals and lays down a code of equity which applies to all. From law a society may rise to be governed by a constitution, a set of rules in which all citizens may safely find a place. Of all the states of ancient Greece, the Spartans were the most widely admired for the stability of their constitution.

Constitutions are like cars: change the model styles every year--and you get waste, high costs, and an immediate, but superficial, appeasement of popular desire. There are many people who feel insecure in this changing world, and who yearn for the rock of unchangeability. Such a

rock was the Eunomia, System of Good Laws, instituted at Sparta by her semi-mythical lawgiver, Lycurgus. This system of law and government abided for a quarter of a millenium without serious change, and gave to the Spartan people a ballast with which to sail the stormy seas of inter-polis politics and warfare.

When the Persian autocrat Xerxes was invading Greece in 480 B.C., he had as an adviser the renegade Spartan king Demaratus, who had been driven into exile by his fellow king, Cleomenes. When Xerxes, after praising the efficiency of an army led by one supreme autocrat, challenged Demaratus, the king replied proudly of his Spartans, *"They are free--yes--but not entirely free; for they have a master, and that master is Law, which they fear much more than your subjects fear you. Whatever this master commands, they do."* Apparently in the eighth and early seventh centuries B.C. Sparta had had its share of typical problems then afflicting the Hellenic world. She was ruled by two hereditary monarchs under some guidance from a greedy aristocratic class. The common citizens were poor, exploited, having no share in the bounty of the land. Their position called out for redress.

Lycurgus flourished c. 670 B.C., a scion of the royal Eurypontid house. Sensing the disorder of Spartan society at the time, Lycurgus claimed to have received from Apollo's oracle at Delphi approval for a great constitutional change. The other provisions of Lycurgus were all unwritten, but the Great Rhetra, as it was called, was written down and became Sparta's Magna Carta. It provided for two constitutional monarchs, an elected senate of thirty seniors, and an assembly of adult male warriors who would take an active role in Spartan affairs. A reactionary amendment, passed later, limited somewhat the power of the warrior assembly, and the creation of an elected five-man executive board, the ephors, further took decision making to the upper echelons of government. Still, Sparta was a revolutionary leader in Greece at a time when most states languished under oppressive aristocracies.

Lycurgus thus established his "Eunomia" in Sparta. All citizens were now called "Equals" and were given plots of land worked by state-owned Helots. One might criticize the price of the "freedom" Sparta found in her harsh, militaristic way of life--but that she was a leader in laying down laws and a strong constitution there can be no argument. Those volatile, quick-witted rivals, the Athenians, had to wait almost a century for Solon and Athenian constitutionality.