Where have you gone, Sgt. York?

Would state's World War I hero recognize the nation he proudly served?

By Ivy E. Scarborough
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Guest column

Thirty years ago this Sept. 2, one of America's greatest war heroes, Sgt. Alvin York, died at the age of 76. The anniversary of his death, for those who know his life, evokes not grief for the departed hero but for the nation he was so devoted to but would scarcely recognize today. The extent of his fame in his time is lost in our generation. Sadly, the extent and depth of his character are also lost in our time.

If there ever was an individual whose life embodied the observation that character is destiny, it was York. That character was his true legacy to the nation, not his exploits in the Argonne during World War I. But those who remember York's life, and they are fewer with each generation, persist, by and large, in seeing only its colorful surface of martial glory. York himself would be, and was, the first to disavow the shallowness of that view.

Born Dec. 13, 1887, in a one-room log cabin in Fentress County, the third of 11 children, York had few prospects except a lifetime of poverty and hard physical labor. Having never finished more than the equivalent of a second-or third-grade education, his prospects diminished further with the death of his father when York was 24.

York increasingly drifted with the wild crowd in late night drinking binges on the Kentucky border that frequently led to brawls and gambling away his meager wages. Confronted one night after a binge by his devout Christian mother, York's conscience was galvanized by one simple question: "When are you going to be a man like your father and your grandfather?"

York later described his commitment to the Christian faith by reference to the writings of the apostle Paul in the New Testament: "And when I quit, I quit all. I am very glad I did. I am a good deal like Paul — the things I once loved, I now hate."

In a lifetime display of the salient trait of his character, York's commitment was real, deep and lasting. The virulent infections of hypocrisy and shallowness never weakened his spiritual constitution. Unlike so many professing Christians of our day whose lives are scarcely distinguishable from the rest of humanity, York stood with a firmness and resoluteness that would bewilder our society, given as it is to situational ethics and moral veneers.

His commitment was tested. With America's entrance into World War I, York, along with thousands of other Americans, was sent a draft notice. York balked, convinced that the Bible's command against killing would prohibit him from going to war.

Despite the efforts of his spiritual brother and dear friend, the Rev. Rosier Pile, York could not avoid service. Fortunately, his commanding officer with the 82nd, the All-American Division, Maj. George Edward Buxton, was a student of the Bible.

Buxton cited passages from the Bible, then sent York home on a pass. As depicted in the 1941 movie classic "Sgt. York," York spent two days and a night with his coon hound and his Bible on a mountaintop near his home in prayer. His quest for a divine answer was rewarded with an inner peace "like the waters of the lake when the master said, 'Peace be still.'" He left for France convinced he was doing God's will and equally convinced he would return unharmed.

The horrors were a shock: "And, oh my, we had to pass the wounded. And some of them were on stretchers going back to the dressing stations, and some of them were lying around moaning and twitching. And the dead were all along the road. And it was wet and cold. And it all made me think of the Bible and the story of the Antichrist and Armageddon."

But the essence of the York public legend was lived out in a few deadly minutes in the Argonne Forest on Oct. 8, 1918. Sent with a detail of 17 men to silence a battery of German

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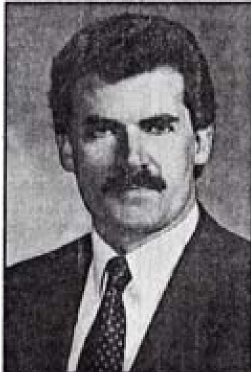
machine guns, only York and six others were left able to continue the fight when the Germans raked the contingent. York positioned himself among some captured Germans and began methodically to kill every German machine gunner who peered over the parapet to spot him.

Frustrated, the Germans charged him with fixed bayonets. York used his .45 pistol with its seven-round magazine to kill the seven charging Germans,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shooting the last first, so as not to alarm the onrushing enemy and cause them to halt and fire a volley at him.

The poise and self-discipline required for the precise and methodical shooting were more remarkable than the shooting skills themselves. The contrast between York's behavior and the frantic and even desperate fire that would typify most such combat would not be lost on any experienced veteran.

Many years later on an early morning fox hunt, York described the experience to Leo Hatfield, now 82 and still living in Fentress County, explaining that when the shooting began, he was obscured by small trees and brush. York noted that when it was over, all the brush around him had been shot away, yet he was unscathed. York gave the credit where credit was due, "It was not manpower. A higher power than manpower guided and watched over me. . . ."

The Germans surrendered, leaving York and his six comrades with 132 prisoners. Twenty-five German bodies were later counted. Just as he did not take credit for his triumph, he did not glory in the deaths of the enemy. He killed, he said, because he could see no other way to stop the German machine gunners from killing many others.

Though the approbation of man was never what motivated York, he received it nonetheless — a deluge. Marshal Foch presented him with the Croix de Guerre with palms, announcing, "What you did was the single greatest act of any soldier of the allied armies in the war." Gen. John "Blackjack" Pershing, commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, decorated York with the Distinguished Service Cross and the Congressional Medal of Honor calling him "the greatest civilian soldier of the war." Every allied nation awarded him its highest decoration for valor.

Upon his return to New York, he was given a ticker tape parade and feted by the leading lights of society and politics of that day. His reaction to the zenith of fame was to long to go home to his betrothed Miss Gracie, his mother, his coon hounds, and the mountains of Tennessee.

But York's grace knew no bounds. As dozens of financial offers valued in several millions of today's dollars poured in seeking his endorsement of products or participation in entertainment ventures, York adamantly refused, admonishing that what he had done was not for sale. Perhaps in this act, as much as any other, he cemented his status as an unselfish man of conviction.

Indeed, York's interpretation of true value was, in virtually all points, at variance with the interpretation of late 20th century American society. When most Americans speak and think of "the American dream," it is a euphemism for unbridled materialism. For York, the American dream was most completely synonymous with another concept — freedom. But even in the defining of the word "freedom," our culture would have appalled and grieved York.

The millions today demanding absolute personal autonomy to adopt the lifestyle they choose would reflect in York's mind, the dissipation and decadence of Israel when the Bible in Judges 17:6 said, "Everyone did what seemed right in his own eyes."

York would have agreed with the philosopher Eric Hoffer's observation that true freedom is reflected more in what we are free not to do than what we are free to do.

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Asked recently what stood out in his mind most about the character of York as he knew him later in life, Leo Hatfield unhesitatingly noted his peaceful serenity, "He never seemed to get upset about anything."

Sgt. Alvin Cullum York

York's words from his diary explained his inner peace, "Yet there is no use worrying about anything except the worry of so many souls that have passed out into the Deep of an unknown world and have left no testimony as to the welfare of their souls. . . . So what is the use of worrying if you can't alter things? . . . Just ask God to help you and accept them and make the best of them by the help of God."

Through humility, not intellectual pride, York had found the ultimate peace. In a nation that, in the words of Pope John Paul, embodies a "culture of death," where would we find such a person as York today? Where today would we find any celebrity from any field so ready to reject the shallow adulation of millions for humble amenities and genuine relationships? In a society seething with conflict, competition and arrogant assertiveness, where would we find a leader, any leader, with such a vision?

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