

BATTLING THE RUFFIANS IN AMERICAN FREEMASONRY

Review and Commentary on the Past Grand Master Robert G. Davis Presentation to the William O. Ware Lodge of Research

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In October 1859, the then Grand Master of Kentucky, Rob Morris, asked whether Masonry would survive the causes at work deteriorating it. He also expressed that it was the Masonic knowledge in *the few* that sustained the Institution when the Masonic knowledge of *the many* brought it down.¹

In November 2022, Robert G. Davis, Past Grand Master of Oklahoma, delivered a dynamic and timely presentation as the guest speaker at a dinner event in Northern Kentucky sponsored by the William O. Ware Lodge of Research. The title of his presentation was, “It’s Time to Cross the Rubicon and Battle Our 20th Century Ruffians.” His entire presentation may be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmMEJErveXU>.



He began with the story of Julius Caesar marching a single legion to the boundary between Gaul and Italy in 49 BC that was marked by a shallow river known as the Rubicon. Caesar faced a choice. If he remained in Gaul, he would forfeit his power to his enemies in Rome. Crossing the Rubicon into Italy would be a declaration of war. Caesar chose war. He marched his legion across the Rubicon and changed Rome forever. He presided over the end of the Roman Republic and the start of the Roman Empire.

The phrase “crossing the Rubicon” became an expression that meant “passing a point of no return” — to make a decision, or take a step that commits one to a specific course of action from which there is no turning back.²

Past Grand Master Davis went on to say that today, “Our American Grand Lodges are literally standing on the threshold between a renaissance and a demise of our fraternity at this point in our history. American Freemasonry may be at a bridge or point of crossing at this moment of our organizational history and there is concern that if we do not cross the Rubicon and start doing battle

¹ Rob Morris, *The History of Freemasonry in Kentucky*, Louisville, Morris, 1859.

² Mary Beard, *Senatus Populus Que Romanus (SPQR)*, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, 1st edition, New York, Liveright Publishing, 2015, Victor Duruy, “*Suetonius Life of Julius Caesar*,” 1883, in Davis William Stearns, *History of Rome vol. V*, Readings in Ancient History, 1912.

with ourselves – that is our organizational paradigms that are now harming us – we might end up a tiny cabal of old men who are of no significance to Freemasonry and the outside world.”³

The entire presentation should be eye-opening to Masons who have paid little to no attention to the events that have happened over the past eight decades (and which continue to occur) in American Freemasonry. As Davis pointed out, this characterizes the bulk of the Fraternity and its leadership.

He noted that one of the Ruffians confronting Masonry is the mediocrity that has been brought into the practice of the Craft over the past 80 years. Moreover, that Masons were not taught the purpose of, the reason for, and the profound significance of the initiatic experience: they have failed to focus on how Masonry actually informs the transformation of the individual.

Davis explained why Freemasonry is not served when Lodges merely go through the motions of being part of the Fraternity in name only, without offering members a quality Masonic experience or an understanding of what Masonry is designed to do. That circumstance was described as offering only “a pretend experience” and identified a second Ruffian, which he labeled: “fake authenticity.”⁴ In balance, he noted that it may be argued by some that going through the motions, or embracing the unexceptional, *is* an authentic Masonic experience, at least to them. But he also pointed out that the behavior of the past 80 years has created a Fraternity that is passive and content to sustain that brand of Masonry and experience, so what else but the customs of the past would the mass of rank-and-file Masons follow?

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He noted that American Freemasonry is the only Freemasonry in the world that ever adopted the model under which Freemasonry has underperformed — a model that embraces the notion that every seemingly good man is fit for Freemasonry.

The third Ruffian that he identified is that most Masons, leaders and Lodges are currently unaware of the profound significance of the moment. He suggested that if they were to undertake a significant analysis of Grand Jurisdictions, they would come to the realization that if some substantial changes are not made soon, Freemasonry will, in fifteen to twenty years, be where the Oddfellows are today. Davis explained that by the end of the current decade, we will know if American Freemasonry will thrive or die, and “that phenomenon exists only in North American Freemasonry while all Freemasonry in the rest of the world is growing.”⁵

This presentation is not the first time that Davis has given his warranted and well-founded analysis of the problems that continue to face the Fraternity. Always a vocal advocate for Masonic education

³ Robert G. Davis, “It’s Time to Cross the Rubicon and Battle our 20th Century Ruffians,” William O. Ware Lodge of Research Private Dining Meeting, November 3, 2020, Fort Wright, Kentucky, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmMEJErveXU>.

⁴ *IBID.*

⁵ *IBID.*

and appropriately conveyed instruction, he began his scolding 2015 brief essay, *Mediocrity in Masonry...Shame on Us!* with an observation and a penetrating question: "One of the questions that occasionally eats at me when I am driving home from a Masonic event, degree, or function that has been woefully mediocre is how our members can sit through such Masonic happenings month after month and still believe our fraternity is relevant and meaningful to men's lives?"⁶

Most Worshipful Brother Davis's thirty-eight-minute presentation in November affirms the forecasts made by many Masonic scholars, small groups of Masons and leaders since the mid-1850s. His forty years of labor and service to the Craft, including several books, other writings, presentations, and consistent leadership gives Masons today, and historians in the future, a clear picture of how and why the American Fraternity ended up on a path that would inevitably lead to its own Rubicon.

The question of whether the Fraternity will cross the Rubicon, or sit idly on the banks allowing the wreckage of the Ruffians, of which that Davis warns to continue and consume it, is close to an answer.

BATTLING RUFFIANS

The Great Schism from 1753 through 1813, where a deep division within the Fraternity from opposing factions given the names of "The Moderns" and "The Antients," qualifies as an early battle with Ruffians. The Anti-Masonic sentiment and movement that brewed in America from 1798, and was later accentuated by The Morgan Affair in 1826, arose as a result of Ruffian thinking that rapid

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expansion of a poorly instructed Craft was a sound strategy. The conflicts of this era left lasting battle scars. The rapid and unbridled expansion of lesser-instructed members again in the 1840s through the 1870s were also battles fought. The effects of the Age of Fraternalism on Freemasonry in the latter years of the 19th century through the early years of the next must be listed on the battle map. The anomalies of the explosive expansion of members and Lodges following both World Wars and the effect of those years cannot be overlooked. In point of fact, it is the aftershock of the post World War II massive influx of members, and their influence, on Masonic cultural thinking, that continues to ripple through the Fraternity.

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⁶ Robert G. Davis, "Mediocrity in Freemasonry...Shame on Us!", *The Laudable Pursuit*, August 3, 2014, <https://www.thelaudablepursuit.com/articles/2015/8/2/mediocrity-in-masonry-shame-on-us>, accessed 2022.

from the values and principles on which Freemasonry is grounded. In itself, this produces an interesting irony since it is those values and principles society most needs to revisit and embrace.

POSTSCRIPT

Recalling the reference Most Worshipful Bother Davis makes to the Rubicon in his presentation, The Rubicon Masonic Society (TRMS) is a group worthy of specific mention.

Formed in 2013, membership is by invitation only for Master Masons who are actively engaged in their Lodges. Membership in TRMS does not exist as a substitute for Lodge. Now a 501(c)(3) organization, TRMS uses, as a guiding principle, the Latin phrase, *Irrevocabilis se Comittet* (committing oneself irrevocably) in the pursuit of the exploration of Freemasonry. In the decade since its inception, TRMS has been instrumental in advancing Masonic education and elevating the Masonic experience by sponsoring and hosting national Masonic conferences and symposiums, coordinating Festive Boards and producing the popular documentary, “The Masonic Table,” publishing its Transactions and making other Masonic writings available for review. Since 2020, the Society (later including the William O. Ware Lodge of Research and Lexington Lodge No. 1 as co-producers) has produced over forty-five monthly episodes on a virtual platform titled, *21st Century Conversations About Freemasonry*.

As of February 2023, this series has become well-known in not only in the Masonic jurisdictions of the United States, but twelve other countries.⁷ These live Masonic education productions showcase nationally- known presenters, fundamental, historical, and philosophical topics, and have been viewed over 90,000 times on Rubicon’s video sharing and social media platform, YouTube channel with over 19,000 hours of watch time. The series will continue through 2023.

The Rubicon Masonic Society is hardly the only Masonic related group, association, foundation, society, Lodge or research Lodge devoting labor to the exploration of Freemasonry. When many of the participants, subscribers, and followers of these organizations are closely examined, however, we find it is not they who tell the tale, but, rather, the bulk of the members who are not interested or involved.

The battles against the Ruffian concepts in American Freemasonry, as Davis so aptly points out, cannot afford today to be a Pyrrhic victory - winning the battle but losing the war.⁸ We have reached the banks of the Rubicon.

⁷ Google/YouTube Analytics, The Rubicon Masonic Society Channel, March 2023, The Entered Apprentice Degree, the Fellow Craft Degree, The Master Mason Degree, The Path to becoming a Freemason, How Freemasonry Made the Modern World, Living as a Freemason.

⁸ Jeff Champion, *Pyrrhus of Epirus*, Pen & Sword Books, 2009 (A pyrrhic victory is a victory that comes at a great cost. The term relates to Pyrrhus, a king of Epirus who defeated the Romans in 279 BCE but lost many of his troops).