

Speech by Dr Goh Keng Swee, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence at the Commissioning Ceremony of SAF Officers at the Istana on Wednesday, 22nd October 1975 at 6.30 p.m.

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The 18th century in Europe is sometimes known as the Age of Reason or the Age of Enlightenment. This label is to describe an attitude of mind prevailing among thinkers of the day which affirms that man can arrive at the truth through the process of reasoning, as against accepting as true what people in authority say. Rationality of this kind emerged in an earlier period, the 17th century, which produced some of the world's greatest mathematicians - Newton, Descartes and Leibniz. These men with others, helped to lay the foundations of scientific thought.

Belief in reason and acceptance of traditional authority based on privilege and birth are not compatible for long. So it is not surprising that the Age of Reason grew into the Age of Revolution. Countries in Europe in those days were governed by kings, who held real power and were not constitutional monarchs of today. Kings and nobles were allied to the Church one of whose functions was to placate the populace and to lend credence to the king's divine right to rule.

Rational people saw through this pretense and they were opposed to the system in varying degrees. One of the more extreme of them, a Frenchman, claimed that "man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest".

In England, people are not given to such extreme views or in-temperate language, and the Age of Reason did not lead to revolution. The British political system was more flexible and could absorb and adapt to the new ideas. Because of this, they were able to apply newly found knowledge to improve methods of production and transport and in this way brought about the great changes which we call the Industrial Revolution.

So England prospered, while on the continent, kings and nobles lost their heads. It is not surprising therefore that in the following century, the 19th, England was far and away the most powerful and wealthy nation in the world. So much so that the later years of the reign of Queen Victoria could rightly be called "The Age of Opulence".

These labels were thought out by historians to give a convenient shorthand description to the mood, the spirit and the ethos of a period. I wonder what future historians would call our age, particularly in our part of the world. I would venture to guess that one label has as much chance of adoption as any other:-- "The Age of Violence".

The end of World War II some thirty years ago has not brought about peace upon earth and goodwill among men. Since then, armed conflicts, differing only in duration and scale of intensity, have been going on without pause. Today we find many people the world over ready to resort to force to get what they want.

The continent of Asia has had more than its fair share of wars. On the Indian sub-continent, for instance, there have been no less than four wars. Then there was / ^{the} Korean war, involving many nations, including the USA and the People's Republic of China, in addition to the two Korean states.

Nearer home, this year saw the end of the war in Vietnam. Fighting had been going on there for more than twenty years. But this is not a record as many people think. In China, until the communist victory in 1949, wars of one kind or another had been fought continuously for nearly forty years.

Among the ASEAN states, three are fighting externally assisted guerilla insurgencies - Malaysia, Thailand and Philippines. Indonesia had been spared the same fate possibly because of the ghastly large scale massacre in 1965 of members of the Indonesian Communist Party and their families.

The meaning of all these events is sometimes lost to Singaporeans who have had more than a decade of orderly progress and prosperity. Living in an age of violence and in a troublesome corner of the world, we would be extremely lucky if the next few decades turn out to be as tranquil as the last.

The Romans, who have much experience in these matters, have a saying for it:- "If you want peace, prepare for war". And so we have to proceed with our defence preparations. This costs a lot of money which could be better used for other purposes if there were not this need. Large numbers of young men are called up each year for full time national service

instead of going to universities after school. However much we may regret it, not to make these preparations would expose us to grave danger should some sudden unexpected change occur in our part of the world.

Perhaps that some time in the future, mankind will be able to devise a sane international order under which it will not be necessary to spend large sums of money on unproductive military expenditure. But until the golden age arrives - if it ever does - we in Singapore must soldier on.

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