

Patriotism and Free Speech

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Divide and conquer. Those are sound tactics, and they are being used against us. According to most of the opinion polls I have seen, over 90% of all Americans are in favor of the continuation of U.S. bombing raids in Afghanistan. And let us be perfectly clear about this, when we bomb Afghanistan our intent is to inflict damage that must ultimately be born by the long-suffering people of that ill-fated land. If there actually is such overwhelming support in this country for continuing the cycles of violence (although I am not convinced such broad support truly exists), then it is even more important that our national dialogue include voices who admittedly are in the minority on this issue.

Perhaps I am overly naïve, but I was shocked at how quickly some previously enlightened voices of reason joined the “bomb ‘em back to the stone age” chorus. Even formerly sound intellectuals like Christopher Hitchens lost their balance. How else can one explain Hitchens’ unseemly comparison of Noam Chomsky with Falwell and Robertson. Madness can be the only explanation, a madness brought about by a tragedy that is just too great for some minds to bear. And thus, the small and fragile coalition for peace begins to collapse as well.

If ever there has been a time for a calm and collected discussion of all aspects of the perilous age we have just entered, it is now. Opinions offered by persons who hold no actual power to direct events on the world stage are just that, opinions. They are certainly not “attacks.” If we are to believe the words of President Bush, that freedom will not yield to terrorism, then it is imperative that the bedrock of all our other freedoms, free speech, be preserved at all costs. One of those costs is to give a fair hearing to all sides of an issue.

What do we, as a nation, gain and what do we lose when local television stations cancel programs like Bill Maher’s “Politically Incorrect” because he had the audacity to question the cherished belief that the United States can do no wrong? To my mind, simply asking unpopular questions is a highly patriotic act. Hard questions like the ones raised by Chomsky and Maher are not intended to weaken this nation. Quite the contrary. These questions are being asked in an attempt to engage our citizens in a discussion of issues that a few of our leaders would just as soon we ignored. Taking a stand against an unlimited war against an unfocused enemy is certainly not anti-American.

Recently we heard the President’s personal spokesman give the chilling warning that we Americans had better be careful about what we say. And we heard the Secretary of Defense, quoting Winston Churchill, tell us to expect outright lies coming from the Pentagon. Even an impartial observer would have to score this one: Terrorists 2, Free Speech 0. I can’t speak for the men and women wearing U.S. military uniforms today, but I can vividly recall being proud to defend the right of anti-war protestors to demonstrate, even though I was then on the “other side” while serving in Viet Nam. My guess is that many of our servicemen and women feel the same way today.

Free speech is not always easy to defend, particularly when it flies in the face of majority opinion. However, as we learned from our most recent presidential election, the majority does not always carry the day. For those of us who believe that intelligent human beings should be

able to solve their disputes without resorting to massive violence and destruction, the right, actually the OBLIGATION, of speaking freely is of prime importance. Eventually our leaders will grow weary of bombing large rocks into small rocks, and then some serious questions must be asked. For example, what is our exit strategy for these military campaigns? How many civil liberties are to be forever forfeited in the name of domestic security? How is our foreign policy going to change once we have moved the entire world to a permanent war footing? What forms of speech are to be forbidden as “terrorist acts?” And who is to be allowed to ask these questions? The destiny of our nation may well depend upon the answers to these and other difficult questions. Let us pray that we remain free to ask them.

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