

For the Record *Post 8/16/75*

Protecting the Dissenter

The following is excerpted from remarks by Vice Admiral William P. Mack on his retirement earlier this month.

As I complete 42 years of service I would like to leave to the brigade of midshipmen a legacy of one idea which represents the distillation of that experience, I have thought about—and rejected—the most obvious ideas—those of the necessity of remembering the importance of people—that people win wars, not machinery. I have considered also the corollary that knowledge of technology will be the key to naval success in this technical age. There are many other important concepts.

But the one concept which dominates my mind is that of the necessity of listening to and protecting the existence of the dissenter—the person who does not necessarily agree with his commander, or with popularly held opinion, or with you. Unfortunately, history is full of examples—then Commander Mahan, whose novel ideas of sea power fell on barren ground. Then Commander Sims whose revolutionary—but correct—ideas on naval gunnery ran counter to those of his seniors. Then Commander Rickover, who fought a lone battle for nuclear power. All eventually succeeded—but not with the help of patient, understanding naval officers. Regretfully, each needed help from outside.

More recently the course of the conflict in Southeast Asia teaches us a further lesson. David Halberstam in his book, "The Best and the Brightest," attempts to trace the political and military decisions which led our country into this war and its aftermath. Mr. Halberstam uses the technique of examining the careers of those who took part in the decision-making processes. Those, he says, were supposed to be "The Best and the Brightest." I will not give them names, but I knew most of these decision-makers, either personally or from close and frequent observation

in the Pentagon, the State Department, the White House and in Vietnam. They may have been the best; whatever that means; they may have been bright; but most of them were wrong. I knew many who were right on these issues—colonels and captains, some more senior, many more junior, but few of them survived. In those years dissenters were not popular; most wound up either far forward in Vietnam or far to the rear in Iceland. While most of the persons written about by Mr. Halberstam were in the political field or in the Army, some were naval officers.

We cannot afford this way of life in the government or in the Navy in the future, for the intervals given us for discussion and decision will be increasingly shorter. If we are wrong again there may not be any 20th century civilization as we know it.

You may ask—what can you as a midshipman or junior officers do about this. My answer is that time will go by for you—as a busy naval officer—very rapidly. Before you realize it and in a decade you will be the young commander called upon to give your honest and perhaps dissenting opinion. In another few years you will be the senior officers charged with preserving and using the dissenting opinion of another.

The point is to begin at this early age to cultivate an open state of mind—to determine to hear all arguments and opinions, no matter how extreme they may seem, and above all to preserve and protect those who voice them.

I am not advocating the overthrow of the principle of loyalty to command as we know it. Of course you should support the continuation of the idea of carrying out all lawful orders cheerfully and fully once decisions are made. There is no other way. In the future I hope some of you will be the best and brightest, but by all means, listen to the others—they may be right.