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2/6/90 Protests

My first encounter with anti-war protests came Easter Week 1965. They come to mind now.

The University of Colorado had invited a melange of diplomats and business executives, academics and writers for a five-day conference on international affairs. The formal agenda contained nothing about Southeast Asia.

Lyndon Johnson had been returned to the White House the previous November. Voters overwhelmingly chose to avoid the "extremism" represented by Barry Goldwater. The Arizona senator was rejected for advocating the U.S. Air Force bomb the latest yellow peril into submission.

The general view was that Vietnam was a burden America could not avoid, but should not escalate. The casualty rate was "acceptable." Catholic bishops and fundamentalist preachers, with Billy Graham out front, wondrously agreed that American blood was being shed in a "just" war.

Led by the eminent Walter Cronkite, television turned a blind eye to any questioning. Anti-war demonstrations were not shown. Reports of dissent could be found in publications, but rarely on newspaper editorial pages.

In no way was I prepared for the level of anger that roared over Vietnam among Colorado's students and faculty. I was deeply disturbed by the rhetoric and the sight of Viet Cong and Communist Chinese flags in young Americans' hands.

Back in Washington I was assured the student protesters were seeking chiefly to avoid the draft. Their older mentors were lumped with New York's crowd, dismissed as "intellectuals," the ultimate put-down in the LBJ's White House. (The next administration's Spiro Agnew added "effete.")

At any rate, it took almost exactly 2½ years from Boulder's Easter Week for the peace movement to march on Washington. In the months between support for the war trickled away, along with the hope it would be over soon.

My October birthday weekend in 1967 passed at the Pentagon, breathing tear gas and trying to make a reporter's sense of the spectacle presented by America bitterly divided against itself. Not all my tears that day came from the gas.

Within six months, Mr. Johnson

was readying his return to Texas. His burning desire to win the clergymen's just war had been extinguished by the protests he never believed represented the national will, Walter Cronkite's switch notwithstanding.

Americans remained in Vietnam for seven more years. To the end I never doubted the need for some form of protection for the men, women and children who expected U.S. strength to protect their lives and freedom. Their expectations had been created by the White House, going back to Eisenhower. Never again did I want our leaders to make promises that could not be kept.

Now we are engaged in another war, testing above all else if the presidency can be trusted. Kuwait is not Vietnam, but George Bush deserves the doubt that lingers from his predecessors' betrayals. On his own, Mr. Bush has generated a skepticism that cannot be resolved by demanding consent.

In the first place, of my generation's four major wars, the present conflict is the first that was declared when there existed no direct threat to Americans. Korea and World War II

came only after our forces were attacked.

Vietnam was never formally declared a war. It resulted from a series of equivocal decisions that gradually developed into a full-scale commitment. At every step, it was necessary to measure the reactions from the Soviet Union and Red China.

Above all, America's military could not afford to run too far ahead of local defense efforts. It was hobbled always by Vietnamese unwillingness to prosecute the war with the maximum effort. This is the reality that grew into the myth that reluctance at home demanded U.S. forces fight with "one arm tied behind their back."

In any event, despite presidential protests otherwise, Washington does not now possess complete freedom to turn loose its armed might against Iraq. America's power is constrained by the limitations imposed by its partners in the coalition.

The European community has served notice it will not look with favor on the complete destruction of Iraq. In terms of pounding its dictator into submission, the attitude is

Western capitals means a probable curb on today's steady bombardments that could shortly exceed the tonnage dropped during all World War II if continued at the present rate.

In addition, only Kuwaitis join Washington, London and Tel Aviv in believing the Iraqi dictator is a war criminal whose trial would naturally follow a coalition victory. The Saudis waffle on the prospect.

Our other Arab and European allies have divorced themselves from Mr. Bush's personal vendetta against Saddam Hussein. Egypt's president has said he looks forward to working with Mr. Hussein when the present shooting stops. France has made clear it wants no part in finishing off the Iraqi leader.

Why should Americans be forced to remain silent while others with lesser stakes question White House motives as to this war and its aims?

On the question of the morality of the demonstrators' cause, it should be pointed out they enjoy the blessings of both the National Council of Churches and the conference of Catholic bishops. Mr. Bush tried and failed to win the approval of the presiding official of his own Episcopal Church before ordering the fighting to begin. In the last hours the White House could count on only the reliable Dr. Graham.

All these factors should be taken into consideration in judging the current peace protesters. I find no contradiction in their claims that they oppose Mr. Bush's war but cherish the men and women who must fight it. Only a radical few fail to condemn Iraq. Hypocrisy would come with attempts to sabotage the U.S. forces' capability to defend their lives.

My greatest fear in this situation derives from the bitterness evoked on both sides among people still wedded to Vietnam. This time around, why can't we agree to each other's right to disagree? Neither side has a monopoly on patriotism.

Dissent in wartime is the only means citizens have to prevent the men in power from trampling down democracy. As soon as every president has donned the role of commander-in-chief, he has become a putative dictator. History says Lincoln and Roosevelt were not immune. Were they lesser men than George Bush?