

THE PATRIOTISM OF DISSENT

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In the past several years, and especially since the expansion of our activities in South Vietnam, a major public discussion has been going on over the extent to which criticism of any national policy can go without exceeding the bounds of loyalty. No matter where any single citizen stands in relation to the Vietnamese war or any other important government enterprise, he is concerned with the right to criticize. In the following article a distinguished senator who is also chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations states the case for dissent as an obligation of patriotism. —THE EDITORS

A few months ago the American poet Ned O'Gorman was sent on a tour of Latin America that was sponsored by the State Department. Before he left he was warned that if audiences asked difficult questions about the Dominican Republic or Vietnam, he was to reply that he was unprepared. But poets, as we know, are ungovernable people, and Mr. O'Gorman finally rebelled while talking to a group of Brazilian students. In an old and honorable American tradition, he answered their questions by speaking his mind.

"I knew they wanted straight answers and I gave them," he told me after his return to this country. "The applause was long and loud, but the embassy man was furious. 'You're taking money dishonestly!' he told me. 'The government paid you to go on this tour, and it's up to you to defend it, not damn it!' I couldn't make him understand that if I hadn't done what I did, I would have been taking money dishonestly."

To me this was one of the more regrettable instances of a growing tendency in America to equate expression of dissent with lack of patriotism. As criticisms of the Administration's foreign policy have increased in response to the Dominican intervention and the rapid escalation of the war in Vietnam, critics in Congress, on newspapers, on college campuses and among the general public have been accused of

sowing dissension and giving aid and comfort to the enemy. They have been exhorted by editorial writers, politicians and spokesmen for the Administration to trust the President and rejoin the Great American Consensus.

No one challenges the worth of national consensus, but consensus can be understood in two ways. If it is interpreted to mean unquestioning support of existing policies, its effects can only be pernicious and undemocratic, serving to suppress differences rather than reconcile them. If, on the other hand, consensus is understood to mean a general agreement on goals and values, but not necessarily on the best means of realizing them, then and then only does it become a lasting basis of national faith.

It seems to me, particularly at a time like this, when the country is so seriously divided over the war in Vietnam, that the most valuable citizen and the most valuable public servant is the one who gives a higher loyalty to his country's ideals than to its current policy, and who therefore is willing to criticize as well as to comply. In a democracy, dissent is an act of faith. Criticism may embarrass the country's leaders in the short run but strengthen their hand in the long run; it may destroy a consensus on policy while expressing a consensus of values.

Unfortunately, the duty of officials and citizens alike to criticize established policy is handicapped by an unworthy and servile tendency to fear serious criticism of our government. In the abstract we celebrate freedom of opinion, but as soon as some Americans exercise the right, other Americans are shocked. No one, of course, ever criticizes the *principle* of the right of dissent; it is always this particular instance of it, under these particular circumstances, at this particular time, that throws people into a blue funk.

Protestors against the Vietnamese war, for example, have been held up to scorn on the ground that they wish to "select their own wars"—by which

it apparently is meant that it is hypocritical to object to this particular war while not objecting to war in general. I fail to understand what is reprehensible about trying to make moral distinctions between one war and another—between, for example, resistance to Hitler and intervention in Vietnam.

Protestors against the Vietnamese war are in good historical company. When his attacks on the Mexican War as "mean and infamous" were greeted with cries of "Treason!" the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker replied, "Why, if people cannot discuss the war they have got to fight and pay for, who under heaven can? Whose business is it, if it is not yours and mine? If my country is in the wrong, and I know it, and hold my peace, then I am guilty of treason, moral treason."

On January 12, 1848, Abraham Lincoln rose in the U.S. House of Representatives and made a speech about the Mexican War, explaining why he had voted in support of a resolution declaring that the war had been unnecessary and unconstitutionally begun by President Polk. "I admit," said Lincoln, "that such a vote should not be given in mere wantonness, and that the one given is justly censurable if it have no other, or better, foundation. I am one of those who joined in that vote; and I did so under my best impression of the truth of the case."

It is not a lack of patriotism but an expression of confidence in the basic strength and decency of our country to say that it is worthy of criticism. I do not think it is "selling America short" when we ask a great deal of her; on the contrary, it is those who ask nothing, those who see no fault, who are really selling America short. As Thomas Carlyle said, "The greatest of faults is to be conscious of none."

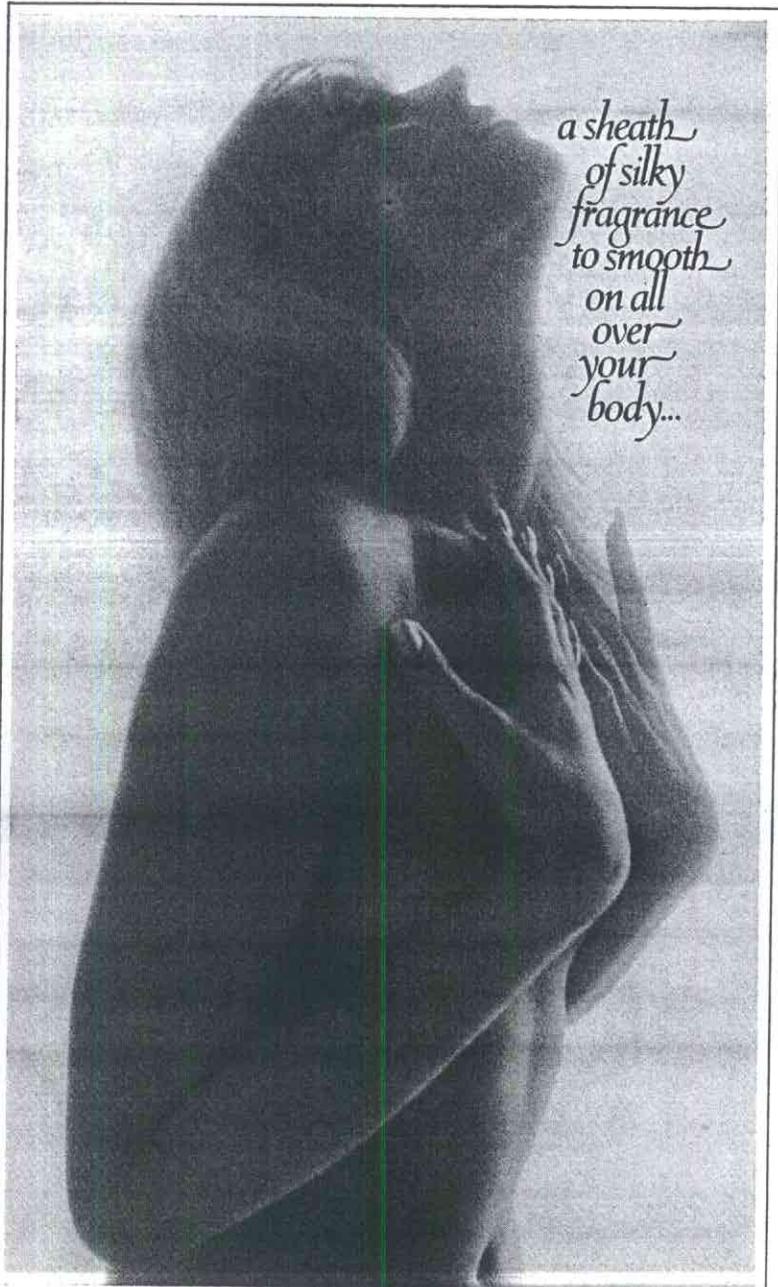
It is in this spirit that the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in recent months has invited officials and scholars to come before it to help increase congressional and public understanding of the problems associ-

ated with our involvement in Vietnam and our relations with Communist China. As long as the opinions held by substantial numbers of our people can get a full and respectful hearing from their elected representatives, the teach-ins and draft-card burnings and the demonstrations are unlikely to become the principal forms of dissent in America. It is only when politicians join in a spurious consensus behind controversial policies that the campuses and streets of the land are likely to become the forums of a disorderly democracy.

Critics of the war in Southeast Asia are concerned not only with what it means to the people of Vietnam but also with its effects on the internal life of the United States. Despite brave talk about having both "guns and butter," the Vietnamese war already has had a destructive effect on the Great Society. In 1965 it seemed that the United States might be about to undergo something of a social revolution. With a degree of partisan harmony that would have seemed inconceivable a few years before, the Congress adopted sweeping legislation to expand education, to provide health care to the aged, to combat urban and rural poverty, to renew our cities and purify our streams and to meet many other long-neglected problems. These accomplishments reflect brilliant legislative leadership, for which President Johnson is justly famed. Vigorously executed and adequately funded, the legislation adopted in 1965 can open the way to an era of abundance and opportunity for all Americans, but for the present, at least, the inspiration and commitment have disappeared.

My own view is that there is a kind of madness in the facile assumption that we can raise the many billions of dollars necessary to rebuild our schools and cities and public transport, to eliminate the pollution of air and water and to correct the appalling social injustices that have given rise to racial violence in Chicago, Cleveland and other cities, while at the same time we spend tens of billions to finance an "open-ended" war in Asia. But even if the material resources can somehow be drawn from an expanding economy, I do not think that the spiritual resources will long be forthcoming from an angry and disappointed people.

is turning away from the pursuit that bring happiness into the lives of people is the first and at present more conspicuous fallout effect of the war on American life. The stirring up of a



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war fever in the minds of our people and leaders; it is only just now getting under way, but as the war goes on, as the casualty lists grow longer and affect more and more American homes, the fever will rise and the patience of the American people may give way to mounting demands for an expanded war, for a lightning blow that will get it over with at a stroke. The first demand may be a blockade of Haiphong; then, if that doesn't work, a strike against the North Vietnamese airfields; and if they then start using air bases in China, a strike against Chinese territory; and then we will have a general Asian war. Already an influential senator has spoken of the United States's making a "desert" of North Vietnam if it violates the Geneva Convention by trying and executing American flyers.

In a contest between a hawk and a dove, the hawk has a great advantage—not because it is a better bird but because it is a bigger bird, with lethal talons and a highly developed will to use them. Yet doves are good birds to have around, particularly when the hawks are flying high. We may question the wisdom and effectiveness of the protest movements of our doves and the students, professors and clergy who are numbered among them, but there is no reason to impugn their courage, decency or patriotism. At the very least, the student protests of the '60s are a moral and intellectual improvement over the panty raids of the '50s. When the dissenters are charged with a lack of patriotism, they can reply with Albert Camus, "No, I didn't love my country if pointing out what is unjust in what we love amounts to not loving, if insisting that what we love should measure up to the finest image we have of her amounts to not loving."

Without illusions about the prospect of success, we must try to bring reason and restraint into the emotionally charged atmosphere in which the Vietnamese war now is being discussed. Freedom of thought and discussion diminishes the danger of an irretrievable mistake by bringing new ideas that may supplant old myths with new realities. We Americans are much in need of this benefit because there is a kind of voodoo about American foreign policy. Certain drums have to be beaten regularly to ward off evil spirits—for example, the maledictions that are uttered regularly against the North Vietnamese aggression, the "wild men" in Peking and Communism in general.

I do not propose that we heap praise on the Chinese Communists or seize every opportunity that comes

along to appease our enemies. I do suggest the desirability of an atmosphere in which unorthodox ideas would arouse interest rather than horror, reflection rather than emotion. We must not lose our capacity to change. The French intellectuals who protested France's colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria not only upheld the values of French democracy but also helped pave the way for the enlightened policies of the Fifth Republic, which have made France the western nation most respected by the underdeveloped world.

I am apprehensive, but I remain hopeful, that America, with its humane and democratic traditions, will find the wisdom to match its great power. It can only do this, however, if the voices of criticism are allowed to ring out freely. To criticize one's country is to do it a service and pay it a compliment. It is a service because it may spur the country on to do better than it is doing; it is a compliment because it evidences a belief that the country can do better than it is doing. The hope that our critics hold out to us today is that we have the possibility, instead of seeking to remake the world in our own image, of helping to bring about some reconciliation, perhaps even some synthesis, of its rival ideologies.

We have the opportunity to set an example of generous understanding in our relations with China, of practical cooperation for peace in our relations with Russia, of reliable and respectful partnership in our relations with Western Europe, of material helpfulness without moral presumption in our relations with the developing nations, of abstinence from the temptations of hegemony in our relations with Latin America and of the all-around advantages of minding one's own business in our relations with everybody. Most of all, we have the opportunity to serve as an example of democracy to the world by the way in which we run our own society; America, in the words of John Quincy Adams, should be "the well-wisher of the freedom and independence of all" but "the champion and vindicator of her own."

None of us—student, professor, politician or private citizen—can advance these aims by uncritical support of the policies of the moment. Criticism is more than a right; it is an act of patriotism—a higher form of patriotism, I believe, than the familiar rituals of national adulation. All of us have the responsibility to act upon this higher patriotism, which is to love our country less for what it is than for what we would like it to be. THE END

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