

Letters to the Editor

Democracy: Casualty of War

To the Editor:

If the war in Southeast Asia could be ended by the anguished cries of university presidents it would no doubt have been over long ago.

Most of us are neither Southeast Asia experts nor skilled global strategists nor (whatever might be wished of us by many of our students and faculty) full-time members of the movement. But we do know something, by hard experience, of what this faraway conflict is costing in terms of democratic values and the capacity for rational discourse on the campuses of this country.

In any war, a democratic polity incurs certain inescapable damage. War by its nature requires secrecy; democracy thrives on full disclosure. War causes people in authority not only to withhold the truth upon occasion; it tempts them to twist and distort it.

Democracy requires that disagreements be thrashed out in argument and resolved by voting. War requires that disagreements be minimized or obscured in the face of the enemy at the gates (no matter how far away those gates may be) and encourages

appeals to emotion and to brute force.

It is therefore no cause for surprise that eight years of war abroad have produced a marked deterioration in the political life of our own country. This deterioration is nowhere more marked than on the leading campuses, where the argument that only force counts is heard from young people whose cynicism in this regard is a deadly threat to the future of a democratic polity.

In particular, students today are either disgusted by or themselves infected with the disease of prevarication and contempt for honest dealings. Ever since they became old enough for political consciousness, they have experienced an unending spate of misinformation and false prophecy with regard to Vietnam. The tortured elaborations of Pentagonese have brought palpably closer the notorious era of doublethink foreseen by George Orwell in "1984."

This comes about, not because of a unique villainy on the part of the protagonists in this particular war, but because war itself is antithetical to democratic values.

We have survived previous wars with democracy largely intact. But major involvement in war has often been followed by a political aftermath of reaction and repressiveness, from the Alien and Sedition Acts of the 1790's through the Mitchell Palmer raids following World War I, to the era of Joe McCarthy after World War II.

The Vietnam war has doubtless been a limited one, for Americans if not for Vietnamese. But its duration now threatens us in deadly fashion.

If the growth of cynicism and doubt continues through another period of years, we will suffer further subtle but ineradicable wounds here at home that will make American democracy in the twentieth century as much a casualty of prolonged warfare as was Athenian democracy in the fifth century B.C.

That is part of the reason why slogans like "Vietnamization" mean so little on the campus today, and why hope is so rare a commodity there.

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