

# DISSENT IS AS AMERICAN AS APPLE PIE

BY RALPH YOUNG

*"American citizens are torn by an ill-advised war and occupation led by leaders who, in seeking to stifle the sort of healthy debate democracy requires, do not seem to understand, indeed, who seem to shun, our nation's history."*

**T**HERE ARE MANY PEOPLE in this country—and this Administration—who claim that anyone opposed to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, as well as America's continued presence there, are unpatriotic (at best) and treasonous (at worst). Indeed, the Patriot Act stipulates penalties for criticism of the government.

Patriotism—at least according to current popular belief—means supporting the decisions of our political leaders. Dissent is considered un-American. Protestors at presidential appearances routinely have been herded into "free speech zones" where their signs and slogans are seen only by the encircling cordon of police. (The Constitution makes no mention of free speech being confined to a zone.) The next thing you know, cars will be sporting the "America: Love It or Leave It!" bumper stickers that were all the rage some 30 years ago.

This attitude, however, only calls attention

to one of the nation's most conspicuous failings—pervasive historical illiteracy. We need to recognize that dissent is the American way; that protest is patriotic. It is, in fact, one of the fundamental traits that defines this country. Cold War scholar Vladislav Zubok has pointed out that it was only when the Soviet Union saw American protestors take to the streets demonstrating against the Vietnam War that they finally overcame their distrust of the U.S. and began to believe in democracy.

The English colonies in North America were founded on dissent, and almost immediately after religious secessionists arrived in Massachusetts Bay, voices of protest rose up against the Puritan authorities. Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams were banished for their views during the first decade of settlement. Remember, too, that patriots fought the American Revolution to establish independence from a government that was not responsive to the needs of its subjects—thus, re-

sulting in the Declaration of Independence and, ultimately, the Constitution. None of this could have been accomplished without a great deal of debate, protest, resistance, and argument. Somehow, though, America did evolve into a country that respected all forms of freedom, especially freedom of speech. Or did it?

## Lynch mobs

Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison once was rescued from being lynched by a pro-slavery mob when the mayor of Boston had him thrown into jail. While incarcerated, Garrison wrote on the wall: "Wm. Lloyd Garrison was put into this cell Wednesday afternoon, October 21, 1835, to save him from the violence of a 'respectable and influential' mob, who sought to destroy him for preaching the abominable and dangerous doctrine that 'all men are created equal.' . . ."

Neither persecution nor time diminished



Garrison's radicalism. On July 4, 1854, he publicly burned a copy of the Constitution, proclaiming that, because it acquiesced in the institution of slavery, it was "an agreement with death and a covenant with hell."

In 1846, when Mexican forces had fired on U.S. troops that had been sent across the disputed southern border to provoke such an incident, Pres. James Polk asked Congress for a Declaration of War. "American blood," he proclaimed, "had been shed on American soil." A freshman congressman from Illinois sarcastically criticized the President's policy by introducing the so-called "Spot Resolution," which would have required Polk to travel to Mexico to point out the exact spot on "American soil" where this had taken place. The resolution was defeated. Moreover, it seems likely that Polk questioned Rep. Abraham Lincoln's patriotism.

Writer Henry David Thoreau, also in protest over the war with Mexico, refused to

pay a poll tax because he could not in good conscience support an imperialistic government that sought to expand the institution of slavery into new territory. After his arrest and subsequent release, he penned *On Resistance to Civil Government*.

When there is an unjust law, Thoreau wrote, such as those legalizing the institution of slavery, then it is the duty of every just man to break that law. No true patriot allows injustice to go unchallenged.

Thoreau's friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, visited him the night he spent in jail. "Henry," he asked, somewhat scandalized by such outrageous behavior, "what are you doing in there?" To which Thoreau purportedly replied, "Ralph, what are you doing out there?"

Former Civil War officer and Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz denounced U.S. Imperialism in 1899 after America had taken over the Philippines and Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War. "Certainly," he

said, addressing an audience at the University of Chicago, "every patriotic citizen will always be ready, if need be, to fight and to die under his flag wherever it may wave in justice and for the best interests of the country. But . . . woe to the republic if it should ever be without citizens patriotic and brave enough to defy the demagogues' cry and to haul down the flag wherever it may be raised not in justice and not for the best interests of the country. Such a republic would not last long."

Theodore Roosevelt, never one to shun a military solution to a crisis, was so critical of Pres. Woodrow Wilson's policies during World War I that he attacked those who claimed it was wrong to oppose a president in time of war. "To announce that there must be no criticism of the president," Roosevelt contended, "or that we are to stand by the president, right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American public. Nothing but the truth should be spo-

ken about him or anyone else. But it is even more important to tell the truth, pleasant or unpleasant, about him than about anyone else.”

Meanwhile, writer Randolph Bourne was a relentless critic of American policy in general. During times of war, Bourne wrote, a “herd-

feeling inevitably arises. There always is a demand for 100 percent Americanism, among 100 percent of the population. The State is a jealous God and will brook no rivals. Its sovereignty must pervade everyone, and all feeling must be run into the stereotyped forms of romantic patriotic militarism which is the tra-

ditional expression of the State. . . . War becomes almost a sport between the hunters and the hunted. The pursuit of enemies within outweighs in psychic attractiveness the assault on the enemy without. The whole terrific force of the State is brought to bear against the heretics.”

Many older Americans remember quite vividly the fervent protests against U.S. policies on racism, feminism, and war expressed by such prominent dissenters as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Stokeley Carmichael, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Tom Hayden, Mario Savio, Angela Davis, Abbie Hoffman, Allen Ginsberg, Gloria Steinem, and countless others. All of these individuals believed they were acting in the American tradition for the American people. They were dedicated fully to the ideals of democracy and resisted all those who strove to limit it. As a consequence, they helped shape the nature of our society. Anti-war activist Carl Oglesby hit the nail squarely on the head when he stated in 1968 that “We’ve come to the point where ‘democracy’ is considered a radical idea.”

Today, American citizens are torn by an ill-advised war and occupation led by leaders who, in seeking to stifle the sort of healthy debate democracy requires, do not seem to understand, indeed, who seem to shun, our nation’s history. Many of those who opposed the war not only wanted to give peace a chance, but take back the Federal government, which appears to have been hijacked by ultra-rightist hawks.

Neoconservatives have taken control of a country that, historically, has prided itself on the values of peace, democracy, equality, and freedom. They systematically are eroding (if not actually demolishing) those ideals. There is nothing “conservative” about them.

A democracy depends on an educated, well-informed citizenry as well as leaders who are deeply connected and committed to cherishing, conserving, and nurturing the ideals which are supposed to set the U.S. apart from the rest of the world. Those in power, today, however, are not caretakers of the American Dream. Will they be judged by history—like the despoilers of the pharaohs’ tombs—as looters who have drained all meaning from the treasures of American democracy?

Should we reach the point where—in joining with the sentiments of the international community—Americans view their own nation as a threat to world peace, what hope is there? How will countries that do not even pretend to respect or desire freedom ever evolve into the types of societies that are not weighed down by terror and fear. Someday—perhaps sooner than we think—we will look at the rest of the world from our “city upon a hill” and all we will see is our own haunted reflection staring back at us. ★

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Pres. Woodrow Wilson (center, in top hat)

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