

commentary

from other pens...

Dems step up criticism of war on terrorism

Some Democrats pondering a run for the White House in 2004 have started to step up criticism of President Bush for his conduct of the war on terrorism, a strategy considered risky by many political observers. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry and 2000 Democratic nominee Al Gore have recently offered pointed criticism of the Bush administration's conduct of the war on terrorism.

House Democratic leader Dick Gephardt spoke on foreign policy a month ago and warned that the United States must be careful about going it alone. Democrats focused on the 2002 congressional elections have been more careful to separate domestic issues from the anti-terror efforts.

North Carolina Sen. John Edwards, Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman and Vermont Gov. Howard Dean have focused much of their criticism on domestic policy, although all the Democrats in this group have criticized the administration's Middle East policy.

"These guys have their eyes on the Democratic primary electorate," Democratic pollster Celinda Lake said. "When you talk to Democratic primary voters, you hear more grousing about the war on terrorism."

She noted the primary map contributes to that approach by potential candidates, with voters in Iowa and New Hampshire — especially Democratic women — more susceptible to arguments against the war. The primary calendar then leads them to South Carolina, where black voters — who also have expressed concerns — are a key group.

—Gore told supporters in Memphis, Tenn., last weekend the Bush administration hasn't gotten Osama bin Laden or the al-Qaida operation. And he said Bush's advisers have "tried to use the war as a political wedge to divide America."

—Kerry said on a Sunday TV talk show last weekend the Bush administration made "an enormous mistake" by relying mostly on Afghans to pursue al-Qaida in the Tora Bora area of Afghanistan. "The prime target, al-Qaida, has dispersed and in many ways is more dangerous than it was in the mountains of Tora Bora."

—Daschle said in a recent newspaper interview that Bush needs to do a better job of articulating his war strategy both here and abroad. And he said the president may have raised expectations too high by vowing to get bin Laden "dead or alive." Daschle, who hasn't indicated whether he's interested in a 2004 run, said earlier that the capture of bin Laden and other al-Qaida leaders was necessary to consider the war a success.

Asked about Gore's comments, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said voters were united on the war on terror and would not respond favorably to such criticism.

"Within the Democratic Party, there are many different people who jockey and vie with each other," Fleischer said. "If the Democrats want to make the war a partisan issue, that is their right."

GOP pollster Whit Ayres said: "The Democrats who are criticizing the president look like they want the president to fail because they would gain a tactical advantage. Virtually all Americans, Republican, independent and Democrat, want the president to succeed in the war on terror."

Political observers say the difficulty with Democrats criticizing the president on the anti-terror effort is they're taking on an issue that is his strongest suit with the public.

"The problem Democrats have on the war on terrorism is that the public trusts the president and Republicans generally more on the war on terrorism," said Matthew Dowd, a GOP pollster and strategist.

But Democrats wanting to position themselves for party primaries may have no choice, despite the president's advantage on the issue.

"What's unusual is the persistence of the president's rally effect," said political analyst Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution, noting Bush has remained strong despite "some problems and some controversies."

"Democrats can't simply concede the war on terrorism to the president," Mann said. "Sure, there are risks, but there are risks of conceding everything and never having the standing to criticize where appropriate."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers politics and polling for The Associated Press.



ANOTHER SUICIDE BOMBING ON WALL STREET

I like living in a free country

I don't know about you, but I live in a free country.

At least, it's still free at the moment. Or maybe it isn't. It still isn't free from racial prejudice. It isn't free from poverty and hunger. It isn't free from sexual harassment and unequal job compensation.

It isn't free from censure; we all criticize much too much.

It claims to honor diversity of opinion, but really doesn't.

The list is endless, but that's just looking at the dark side of America.

This week we celebrate the strengths of our country and the love we have for it. I tried once to write a poem about this great nation, but failed miserably.

My words were pitiful compared to those of others.

So today I offer some of theirs instead of my own:



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William Arthur Ward: "I believe in America. I believe it became great because of its faith in God, its hope for independence and its love of freedom."

"I am grateful for America's glorious past; I am awed by its unbelievable present; I am confident of its limitless future."

"I am not ashamed to take my hat off and to stand at attention when OLD GLORY passes by."

"I do not apologize for the lump in my throat when I repeat the Pledge of Allegiance."

"I am not embarrassed by the tears in my eyes when I hear the 'Star-Spangled Banner.'"

"Like millions of Americans, I want a free

choice, not a free handout. I prefer an opportunity to prove my abilities on the job rather than a license to demonstrate my frustrations on the street. I am an old-fashioned American with a new-found determination to do my part to make democracy work."

John F. Kennedy: "My fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country."

"My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man."

As I write this, mindful of today's newspaper warning about possible terrorist attacks on our country as we commemorate our nation's birthday, I prayerfully hope we all had a happy and safe Fourth of July.

May our nation, with all its faults, continue to be a bright light of hope for a dark world. Only with our acknowledged dependence on God can that happen.

Free speech: A fourth of July tribute

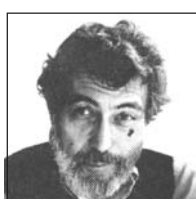
At times, readers correct me. At other times, I return the favor — especially when constitutional rights are in question. Because of poor schooling in these foundations of our freedom, many Americans are not as fully informed on the Bill of Rights, for example, as they ought to be, even on the Fourth of July.

Bob Roenigk, a reader from Needville, Texas, takes me to task for a column I wrote about Janis Heaphy, publisher of the Sacramento Bee, who was booed off the stage before she could finish her commencement address at California State University.

The hecklers in the audience objected to her concerns about whether John Ashcroft — in enforcing our need for security against terrorism — was adhering to the American values of due process (fairness) with regard to racial profiling and allowing government agents to listen in on conversations between detainees and their lawyers.

Mr. Roenigk writes "our First Amendment is clear that 'Congress shall pass no law ... abridging the freedom of speech.' Congress did not intervene in preventing Ms. Heaphy from finishing her speech. The audience did that. Our founding fathers did not include a provision mandating that citizens must listen to what someone else is saying."

In historical fact, however, since the ratification of the 14th Amendment (1868), the scope and power of the First Amendment have been greatly expanded to include the free-speech protections of individual Americans from all government entities: federal (the Congress and other branches of the national government), state and local. For example, if at a public college, a student or professor charges that the administration has abused his or her First Amendment rights of speech or press, an



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action or redress can be filed in court.

The 14th Amendment states: "Nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." That includes the Bill of Rights.

It took the Supreme Court many years to rule that because the 14th Amendment, and all Bill of Rights' amendments, extend, as Justice Hugo Black said, "to all people of the nation." But still, in the April 19 Washington Times, a letter writer believes that "only the federal government is restricted by the First Amendment."

The persistence of Justice Black finally persuaded the court to also incorporate the right to a public trial; protection from unreasonable searches and seizures; the right to counsel; the right against self-recrimination; the right to an impartial jury; and the right against being placed in double jeopardy. These are no longer applied only to the federal government. We are protected from all such abuses by all levels of government.

As for what happened to the speaker at California State University — a public institution of learning — I refer to the column I wrote that was criticized by the reader from Texas:

"Heckling is protected speech" under the First Amendment. But heckling is no longer protected free speech if "the speaker cannot continue. That, in law, is called 'the heckler's veto.'"

Once it became clear that Janis Heaphy was not

going to be heard above the boos and jeers of the audience, the president of the university — who was on the stage — should have firmly informed the audience that the speaker's First Amendment rights trumped their First Amendment rights when they make it impossible for her to finish her speech. Moreover, the university president would have been within his rights to have campus police escort the hecklers out of the auditorium.

What the members of that audience were demonstrating is an all too common affliction among out-of-control hecklers across the political spectrum. As George Orwell wrote:

"At any given moment, there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question."

If a speaker questions righteous orthodoxy, as I, a pro-lifer, have before some college audiences, the "right thinkers" in the audience sometimes try to drown me out. Since I can out-shout them when I have to, they have yet to succeed.

What this all comes down to, as Orwell made clear, is that "if liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear." In this regard, a number of college administrators within this country have brought discredit to their institutions by not protecting California Board of Regents Ward Connerly's right to finish his criticisms of affirmative action before he was shouted down.

Free speech — even in criticism of John Ashcroft and the new FBI's spying powers on Americans at large — means the right to be heard.

It's as basic as that.

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights.

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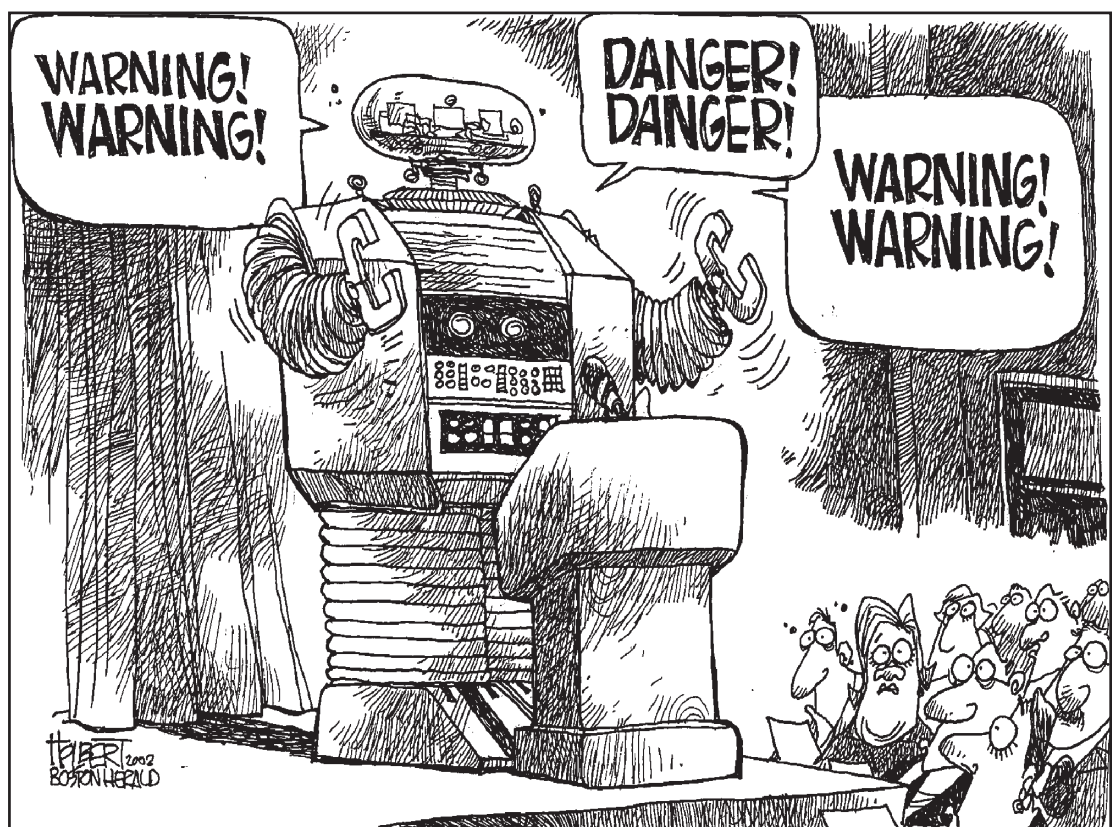
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