

War and Dissent: A Prophetic Tradition

By David Kraemer

The recent brouhaha over Senator Tom Daschle's questioning of the ultimate success of the war on terrorism was, to this citizen, very troubling. We might readily have dismissed Trent Lott's questioning of Daschle's patriotism -- declaring it unpatriotic to question a president while the nation is at war -- if not for the fact that the administration in general actually seems to ascribe to this position. Well, is the administration -- along with Lott and his supporters -- justified in demanding a suppression of political critique in a time of war? Should those who direct our forces, in pursuit of a goal that is undeniably justified, be allowed to do so without the questioning and debate that typically characterize political discourse in this country?

On the one hand, I must confess that, were the shoe on the other foot (that is to say, were the current commander-in-chief one for whom I voted), I could imagine the resentment I would feel at the caviling of caustic conservatives. "How could they question the wisdom of our commanders and our intelligence agencies as they fight a war upon which our nation's security depends? Surely those conducting the war know more than those who question. Trust our leaders we must! Doesn't patriotism demand that we trust, even when we are not inclined to do so?" As I said, I could imagine believing and even saying these things. But I would be wrong.

At root, what distinguishes our society from those we now engage in battle is the very right -- nay, the obligation! -- to question and critique those who govern us. As Tom Friedman has frequently commented in recent columns, what makes us strong -- and them ultimately weak -- is the free society we have constructed and protected. Note well: freedom means far more than the right to purchase what we desire, to live where we like, and to drive any vehicle we choose, regardless of the damage it may do to the environment. Far more crucially, freedom means the nearly unregulated right to challenge the wisdom of official policies, whether in times of peace or war. Indeed, this freedom -- and our support of it -- is even more essential during war, for this is precisely the time that freedom is most in danger of being abridged. Bless those who question well. They are the true patriots!

While the United States is built on the legacy of the Greek democratic tradition, this is not the only legacy that informs the genius of our polity. We also inherit the biblical prophetic legacy and, without this tradition, we would be comparatively impoverished, for democracy, alone, lacks an ethical soul. And what is the prophetic legacy that is so central to the nation we have constructed? It is the tradition of protest and complaint, and the demand that those with less power refuse to stand down in the face of those with greater power. When the ancient Israelite kings waged wars, they

too demanded loyalty without a breach. But the prophets refused -- often at risk of their own lives -- and demanded an accounting, even when the Assyrians or Babylonians were at the gates. The prophets were thought treasonous by the king and his entourage. But, as far as the biblical tradition is concerned, the king was wrong. The cry of the prophet was the cry for justice and mercy. And this prophetic voice has left a legacy to Western culture. Suppress this voice and we suppress the ethical soul of the nation we have built.

So we should praise those who question the rightness of our policies, be they in the conduct of war or in the conduct of peace. It is they -- and not those who demand silent support -- who are our strength and hope.