

The American Approach to Dissent

Jina Kim, 04/03/2003

Politicians, military officials, media correspondents, and artists all have criticisms about the war. However, these criticisms most often derive from anonymous sources in news reports. It is no surprise; many are afraid of being portrayed as unpatriotic or undemocratic. Already, influential figures have lost careers and hard-earned reputations for their words. However, these opposing opinions compel us to think and re-evaluate a complex issue. Dissenting voices help preserve our democracy in which the majority and minority should have equal rights to free speech.

When Dixie Chicks' lead singer, Natalie Maines, criticized President Bush, a 33,000-pound tractor smashed Dixie Chick's CDs, tapes, and paraphernalia at a pro-war rally in Louisiana. Cumulus Media, a radio chain, has banned Dixie Chicks from its playlists. Clear Channel radio stations have organized most pro-war demonstrations. The Dixie Chicks will not be able to survive in their industry if radio stations refuse to play their music. This increasingly hostile attitude towards the minority suppresses their opinions. This example will discourage other figures in entertainment to come forth against the war effort because risk is too high.

Peter Arnett, a prestigious news reporter for CNN and National Geographic was fired for his criticisms of the American war effort on state-controlled Iraqi television. Arnett lost his job because of his stance on the war. Walter Cronkite, anchor of CBS Evening News from 1962 to 1981, agrees that Arnett's actions deserved severe consequences, but explains that Arnett may have been trying to "cozy up" to the Iraqi sources in Baghdad. He regrets that the U.S. has lost a powerful "eye on Baghdad"

(4/1/2001, A19, "Speaking With the Enemy"). I regret that a news reporter lost his job while speaking his mind. Arnett's fate reveals that the press is not so free in war.

Many Republicans are nervous about the war effort, its costs, and its future. However, "none would put their name to their comments, fearing retribution from the White House" (3/31/2003, B1, "Bush Defends the Progress of the War and Is Cheered"). This fear should not exist. Whether Republican or Democrat, every politician should be able to voice their opinion on the war. We especially need a diverse group of viewpoints in the government to keep both war measures and domestic concerns in perspective.

Military figures are also reluctant to identify themselves as well. One colonel, who criticized the decision to limit the initial deployment of troops, only spoke on the condition that his name be withheld. Also, no names were mentioned when "officers compared Mr. Rumsfeld to Robert S. McNamara... who failed to grasp the political and military realities of Vietnam" (3/31/2003, A1, "Rumsfeld's Design for War Criticized on the Battlefield"). The military is expected to carry high support for the war, and these assumptions by the public make it harder for officers to come forth with criticisms.

A strong opposition must have faces in its crowd. Right now, there are many voices, but no one is willing to take responsibility to their comments due to fear of losing respect or jobs. To keep democracy, the American government and public must learn to better tolerate dissenting opinions even on sensitive issues such as the war. Who knows, the minority just might have a good point.