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**A POINT IS MADE ABOUT FREE SPEECH**

**Author(s):** TOM GERETY **Date:** October 30, 2001 **Page:** A19 **Section:** Op-Ed

“BRING THE WAR HOME,” PROTESTING STUDENTS SAID DURING THE WORST DAYS OF THE VIETNAM WAR. AS THE WAR CONTINUED, PROTEST DID INDEED GROW SHARPER AND SHARPER, WITH VIOLENT RHETORIC EVENTUALLY LEADING TO VIOLENT ACTIONS. WILL THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN, THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM, FOLLOW A SIMILAR PATTERN ON OUR CAMPUSES? THIS PAST WEEK WE HAD A FORETASTE OF THIS QUESTION AT AMHERST COLLEGE.

It began quite innocently last Thursday, when **about** 150 students, faculty, and staff attended an "Assembly for Patriotism." Organized by several students, the event was intended to provide a forum for a wide-ranging discussion of what it means to be an American. All **points** of view were welcomed. Many students and faculty participated, liberals and conservatives, radicals and pacifists, as well as those urging a wider military response to the terrorist attacks.

The range of opinion was striking, but one thing was clear: Each person who spoke - regardless of age, national origin, or political bent - was proud and grateful to live in our democracy. As one professor said, "For some people, patriotism means wearing the American flag on your lapel. For others, patriotism means being able to burn the flag. We are all fortunate, though, to live in a country where both of those options are available to us." As the rally ended with the Pledge of Allegiance, six to eight protesters not affiliated with the college held up signs at the back at the crowd. "This flag is not me," one sign said. "This flag is **about** bigotry," said another. Suddenly, two small flags that the protesters had brought with them were in flames. Then, just as suddenly, before anyone had a chance to respond, the fires were extinguished; the protesters themselves had brought liquid to douse the flames.

The crowd watched in stunned silence, obviously shocked and saddened.

Curiously, the protesters had no interest in discussion. They must have agreed in advance not to say anything to those who challenged them **about** what they had done and why. They refused to give their names when our students asked who they were. (E-mails ostensibly from the protesters have arrived this week saying that they believe in the interconnected destructiveness of all nation-states and that America is at war, and all wars have casualties.)

Our student organizers were not just shocked but frustrated and saddened by what happened. In the press, in particular, the message of their rally had been upstaged and confused by this echo from the Vietnam era. But they had the maturity to express their anger in words and questions and to follow it up with extensive discussions around campus **about** protest and dissent in America.

Perhaps the hardest thing **about** this dissent is its impact on those who have lost loved ones. More than a dozen young graduates and close relations of our students died at the World Trade Center and at the Pentagon. The sister of one of the dead spoke beautifully at the rally **about** how angry she had been on Sept. 11 that America let this happen.

In the days since, she went on, she has felt prouder than ever of the freedom and diversity of our country.

Even in this time, especially in this time, with our country under attack by terrorists, we need to define the meaning of our patriotism with care. The protesters at our rally believed that America stands for evil and oppression. The rest of us believe not that America is perfect or without blemish, but - above all - that it is **free**. This means that we have to respect the rights of all to speak freely, even insultingly, **about** our country, its principles and policies.

If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other, Justice Holmes wrote in a dissent in 1929, "it is the principle of **free** thought - not **free** thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate."

Flag burning is perhaps at the very margin of constitutionally protected behavior. The precedents in the federal courts are a little confused. Still most of us believe that the Constitution should protect nearly all expression that does not threaten the rights, lives, or property of others. What these young flag burners did offends sensibilities across the campus and the nation. It hurt deeply many of us who feel with great immediacy and emotion the losses of Sept. 11. But it remains protected expression under the First Amendment.

In the days since the rally, we have received numerous e-mails and phone calls from people praising the students who organized the rally and decrying the actions of those who burned the flag. One of the most thoughtful e-mails came from a Marine who expressed his disappointment **about** the actions of those who burned the flag, while **pointing** out that he had spent many years fighting for their right to do so.

This is precisely the **point** that our students were trying to make.

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