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The Trouble with Protest

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The trouble with protest

January 25, 1991 | By Kenneth Lasson

Yes, we'll rally 'round the flag, boys,
Kenneth Lasson
We'll rally once again,

Shouting the battle-cry of Freedom.

-- George Frederick Root, 1863

AMERICA is a country continually struggling for its soul. Thus can stirring words and patriotic motives be invoked by demonstrators both for and against United States involvement in the Persian Gulf.

But the freedom to engage in open political debate, while in the noblest American tradition, is best exercised with reason and restraint -- qualities sorely and sadly lacking among the anti-war protests these past few days.

Overt opposition to our military offensive in the gulf is much more likely to be useful to the enemy than to have any effect on ending hostilities. Pacifist sentiment was justifiable prior to the formal congressional debate, and perhaps defensible even after passage of the resolution definitively supporting the president. But once war started, the naysaying rhetoric should be tempered by consideration of its consequences.

Those who would remind us of our true democratic ideals -- peace and not war, social responsibility and not oil-sotted prosperity -- dismiss all those who disagree with them as bellicose and selfish.

Their moral condescension is palpable. Less apparent is how facilely they ignore the hard fact that our current policies are precisely the result of democratic process.

Peace demonstrators, of course, have an absolute right if not an obligation to speak their consciences. But instead of being so trigger-quick to malign the motives of those who less noisily support their country, they should show a bit more of the sensitivity and pragmatism they'd have us believe they possess in such ample supply.

Even the senators and representatives who voted their consciences in opposing the president rallied behind him once the will of the majority prevailed, once we went to war. Do any of today's protesters seriously think they can halt the progress or -- prosecution of a military engagement a week or so after it has begun? Have any of them considered the effects of their dissent on the men and women in uniform, and on their families? Can they honestly profess support for our armed forces abroad, whose cause they condemn and spirit sabotage?

Comparing the current demonstrations to those of earlier eras more clearly reveals how ill-conceived and ill-timed they are. The Vietnam conflict began years before the first serious and widespread protests; even the cries of "Hell, no, we won't go!" came well after the fuzzy congressional resolution about a possibly contrived incident in the Gulf of Tonkin. Neither the country nor Congress was nearly as well-informed about our mission in Southeast Asia 30 years ago as they have been about our presence in the Persian Gulf. Nor had our commitment of troops been as clear or anticipatory then as now.

Prior to Pearl Harbor there were protests from many quarters, ranging from high-minded conscientious objectors, isolationists and Congress itself to German sympathizers and American communists. By the time World War II was in full swing, however, none could deny the moral suasion that was at the heart of our decision to fight against Hitler, or the horror-in-hindsight that we had not brought an earlier end to the Holocaust. Those who said then, "Never again!" now fully support our efforts to destroy Saddam Hussein.

Likewise, modern media coverage of anti-war protests appears far out of proportion to the relatively small percentage of the people who support them. If this is a reflection of the pervasiveness of television and its endless appetite for news events, and of the specific intent of the demonstrators to attract the cameras' attention, let the networks beware of the backlash of resentment building up in the minds of the majority. To the extent that such coverage reflects the anti-war bias of media, the media should be even more forcefully taken to task.

At best, demonstrations a week into hostilities betray a lack of common sense and sensitivity. At worst, they are morally irresponsible or consciously subversive. Public demands for a cease-fire and diplomatic negotiations will be both more welcome (and more effective) if we are still in the heat of war six months from now. Even then, though, demonstrators who throw rocks or impede traffic should be summarily jailed. The Constitution, long may it live and prosper, protects the right of the people peaceably to assemble.

To be sure, the current protest, whatever we may think of its wisdom, is another sign of democracy in good health. But those who preach the higher morality of peace over war betray a righteous superiority which refuses to acknowledge the majority view: that Iraq poses a threat that cannot be dissipated by diplomacy, that war is always horrible but sometimes necessary and that, ultimately, we are risking our lives in defense of freedom.

Kenneth Lasson is a professor of law at the University of Baltimore, where he teaches civil liberties and dispute resolution.

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