

Original Message

From: Payton, Robert

Sent: Wednesday, October 10, 2001 10:11 AM

Subject: Dissent

The IU Daily Student (the campus newspaper in Bloomington) yesterday carried a story with a photograph and this headline: "Students set up 'peace camp' in Dunn Meadow." Dunn Meadow is the traditional site of protests at IU-B. The last major demonstrations there protested the firing of Bobby Knight. (I suspect the peace-campers didn't take part in that one.)

As others have observed, the slowly-developing campus-based objections to the war against terrorism as it has focused on Afghanistan have something very Vietnam-ish about them. The substance is similar: war is not the answer. The style is also similar: protests and posters but not much serious discourse among the different points of view. The result is also similar: despite the newspaper and other media coverage, the vast majority of people go about their business unmoved.

On the other hand, if there is an enduring lesson from the protests against the war in Vietnam it is that they had a real effect on policy. The protests called attention to the policy and showed its tragic and fruitless consequences. The voices were heard because, despite some ego-tripping among some of the leaders (and some other kinds of tripping among their followers), the moral level of the protests was high.

I am opposed to protests and demonstrations. They reduce complexity to dangerous simplicity. They muffle or silence discourse. As I've been trying to argue in recent weeks in these notes to you, we will lose our greatest strength and greatest virtue if we allow the debate to drift from a conflict of ideas to a conflict of beliefs. Public teachers tend to be questioners, exploring possibilities and alternatives, respectful of beliefs but not willing to be ruled by dogma.

We face a difficult task right now, because decisions must be made. Some of you may remember a book entitled *Tragic Choices*, those decisions which inevitably lead to consequences that are tragic for some people. The death of the four UN workers yesterday is a case in point; "collateral damage" is a euphemism for such unintended tragedies. We can criticize the reasoning of the military or of the administration, but we can't bring those same skills to the critique of those who are calling for a holy war against the U.S. A holy war is neither rational nor negotiable. The "discourse" I hear from protestors against the U.S. in places like Pakistan doesn't have the look and sound of what is presumably going on again today at Dunn Meadow. We have what at least passes for rational discourse on one side and something that seems guided by belief rather than by reason.

One way to resolve the issue is to abandon discourse and fight, which is what we appear to be doing. Those who have declared war against us greatly reduce our options. They also empower those in our society who have least patience with talk in times of crisis and demand action. We have entered a time in which the ideas and values I have tried to teach and study with you the past dozen years seem to carry very little weight, even seem irrelevant. The martial arts have smothered the liberal arts once again. Cicero must have often felt this way, struggling to preserve the Republic against the tyrants. He lost in the short run; perhaps the Ciceronians usually lose in the short run. So I'll take the long view.

The moral of this? Respect rational discourse; protect it; use it wisely. It's the best instrument for peace we have.

RLP