

On My Mind

1/24/03

Stephen Decatur, an American naval officer of the early 1800's known for his stubborn patriotism, once said, "Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong." According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, third edition, the quote was offered as a toast by Decatur in 1816.

<br><br>

As the many protest marches this past week-end have so amply demonstrated, thousands of people throughout the world believe that "our country," particularly in her "intercourse" with the foreign nation of Iraq, is not "in the right." They believe that the U.S. is acting unilaterally, that its motives are suspect, and that its actions are far too invasive and intrusive. They do not believe war is inevitable, or that war is the solution to U.S. relations with Iraq.

<br><br>

On the other hand, one would assume that people in the military - and their families - do not believe their country is in the wrong. Troops recently being shipped to the Middle East, for example, could hardly accept their assignments if they thought otherwise (though it is difficult to believe that there isn't anyone presently in the armed services who has any reservations about the heavy-handed way President Bush is bullying everyone in his path to accept his view of U.S. foreign policy priorities in general, and the U.S. role in Iraq in particular).

<br><br>

Perhaps those in the military who do have doubts subscribe to Decatur's view of patriotism: "my country, right or wrong."

<br><br>

Does that make those who do not accept Decatur's dictum of "my country, right or wrong," unpatriotic? Does patriotism call for the equivalent of "unconditional love" - the forgiveness of flaws and failures - and perhaps even crimes - because of the connection between citizen and country? Does it call for a defense of the country's actions - or lack thereof - regardless of the damage it may cause? I don't think so.

<br><br>

Perhaps it's all semantic, but I would suggest that maybe it's time to re-define what patriotism means. My dictionary gives only a brief answer: "love of and devotion to one's country." Patriotism, it seems to me, should involve an element of accountability, be defined in terms of support for what one's country represents. At least with that definition, both the war-mongers and the peaceniks would qualify as being patriotic.

<br><br>

Certainly, before the body bags start coming home, there needs to be some way of reconciling the sacrifice the dead have made and the wrongness of the cause.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

As Howard Zinn says in his book, *Declarations of Independence: Cross-examining American Ideology*, which I recently read, and highly recommend, "war is immoral." Though others have said the same, his arguments struck me as more rational than most. He gives example after example that past wars have not been fought for honor, or justice, or other such admirable values,

but for greed, politics, power. The ray of hope is that he believes war - in the sense of massive use of lethal weapons to defend and preserve national interests - is not innate, inevitable, ingrained in the nature of man.

<br><br>

He writes, "...the traditional distinction between 'just' and 'unjust' war is now obsolete. The cruelty of the means today exceeds all possible ends. No national boundary, no ideology, no "way of life" can justify the loss of millions of lives that modern war, whether nuclear or conventional, demands. The standard causes are too muddy, too mercurial, to die for. Systems change, policies change. The distinctions claimed by politicians between good and evil are not so clear that generations of human beings should die for the sanctity of those distinctions."

<br><br>

Moreover, he continues, "Over the past decade, several trillions of dollars have been spent for military purposes - to kill and to prepare to kill. One can only begin to imagine what could be done with the money in military budgets to feed the starving millions in Africa, Asia and Latin America; to provide health care for the sick, to build housing for the homeless, and to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic to millions of people crippled by their inability to read or write or count."

<br><br>

Zinn's book was published in 1990. His reasoning is just as compelling today.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

The imminent shuffle in our judiciary raises some interesting questions. Judge Edward Manibusan's term ends in March, and he has announced his retirement. Meanwhile, Attorney General Mona V. Manglona is being mentioned as his replacement.

<br><br>

Is Judge Manibusan concerned that voters will not support his return to the bench? Is it that he is unwilling to try toe the fine line between campaigning for what is, in effect, re-election, and maintaining the neutrality and dignity of the judiciary? Is it that he is concerned about the costs involved in campaigning?

<br><br>

Or could it be that his retirement benefits are so generous that it would be foolish not to take advantage of them as soon as he becomes eligible?

<br><br>

Attorney General Mona V. Manglona has already shown herself to be bright, competent, capable.

No doubt she would be a great asset to the judiciary. But what a loss it would be to the office of the Attorney General! That office sorely needs the integrity, the backbone, the intelligence that Manglona has brought to that job. Wouldn't she be a greater asset in the AG position - a position of sole responsibility, than on the judiciary, where there are others to help carry out its functions?

And wouldn't there be a conflict of interest with John A. Manglona on the Supreme Court, and Mona V. Manglona on the Superior Court bench in any case?

<br><br>

Particularly if the requirement for voter approval of a second term on the bench played a role in Manibusan's decision to retire, it is high time that the Legislature re-think the law that requires

voter input to judicial appointments. As has been noted, if the past pattern is any indication (no judge has yet won approval for a second term) it won't take long to exhaust all likely candidates. There is also the question: does a "reject" by the voters mean the rejected judge may never again be appointed to the bench? Or is it possible, after a period of time, that the judge may be nominated again?

<br><br>

Yet another question is whether retirement benefits for the judiciary aren't so high as to be counter-productive. Maybe the legislature should look at that as well - especially now when money is in such short supply. The legislature and the executive are looking at budget cuts - shouldn't the judiciary be doing the same?

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

The governor's "dog and pony show" doesn't seem to be winning any awards. One would have thought that with all the high-powered and over-paid consultants in his entourage, someone would have been able to put together a power point presentation for the governor to use in his efforts to sell giving up a 1/2 hour of pay per day to government employees. But that hasn't happened.

<br><br>

What's equally puzzling is not only why, with all the governor's over-paid flunkies (male and female), the governor himself is forced to take his dirty clothes to the laundromat and dry cleaner. Even more baffling, though, is why none of his high-paid entourage were able to persuade the governor that recounting such domestic trivia is not the stuff that leaders or heroes or even "good guys" are made of.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

Though alcoholism isn't generally related to obesity (except in beer-drinking cultures), there's bound to be a connection, since all forms of alcohol contain calories. Whether knowing how many calories a can of beer or a cocktail or a glass of wine contains would have any effect on consumption of alcohol, is of course, open to question.

<br><br>

But the problem is we'll never know, because it is the Food and Drug Administration that requires caloric content of foodstuffs to be reported, and among its many other shortcomings, the FDA apparently does not cover alcoholic beverages. What a pity!