

Esteemed Colleagues of diverse opinions, with respect to the appropriateness of retired military officers publicly criticizing national policies--

This topic is likely to be on the front burner for the near future if what I hear is correct, namely, that a group of senior officers, retired and active, is forming to forestall any effort by the Obama administration to execute the campaign promise to withdraw combat forces from Iraq by the end of 2010. As for active officers, that is inappropriate; it is a violation of professional ethics. It was inappropriate for ADM Fallon, and he correctly retired. Active officers should make their views known, very forcefully, within the system. They have no right to engage in a public relations project to criticize administration policy.

Retired officers have a right, even a duty, to provide the public their professional advice. Let us have an honest debate.

Over the past three years or so, I have been one of those retired officers who have publicly commented on national security issues. Like Bob Gard, with whom I have worked with on some projects, I have talked to many audiences—conservative, moderate, and liberal—on national security issues. I have also appeared as a guest commentator on radio and TV shows and have met with numerous editorial boards around the country. These activities have been under the auspices of several groups; the most significant were sponsored by the Center for Arms Control and Non-proliferation. Most of the focus was the Bush National Security Strategy. I have never received briefings from the Pentagon, nor have I regurgitated “talking points” furnished by any organization. And, if it is important to know, any honoraria I have received has gone entirely to the Fisher House, which helps the families of our wounded at hospital locations.

I should also point out that as the Washington Area Coordinator for the National War College Alumni Association (NWCAA) National Security Symposia, I have arranged programs that focus on the controversial issues. These are, of course, open to the public. Both my personal activities and the NWCAA activities are designed to educate the public on national security issues. While I try to be balanced in my personal presentations, I obviously express my own views. In general my views have been close to those expressed by the 2006 Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group (ISG). With regard to the NWCAA symposia, I believe the NWCAA Board and those who attend the sessions will agree that we present a balanced panel. I will strive to continue this balance as we examine the Obama policies.

With regard to the general issue of public dissent by military officers, I have discussed it in educational settings for over forty years. In my opinion, loyal dissent and whistle-blowing are necessary components of any ethics course. There is, in my opinion, a professional obligation for both under the appropriate conditions. The need for “push-back” by senior officers is essential to a healthy professional officer corps that can be trusted by the public. This always leads to a discussion of the right, or duty, of retired military officers to speak publicly, either for, or against, government policies. There is a fine line between educational venues and wider audiences. In regard to my recent public activities, my first inclination was to stay within the academic setting.

In October 2005, Bob Gard and I went outside the academic setting when we co-authored a pamphlet published by the Center for Arms Control and Non-proliferation. That document, which was distributed to all 535 members of Congress, discussed the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraq. We attempted to weigh the risks for staying and the risks of withdrawal and conclude the risks for a lengthy occupation outweighed the risks of withdrawal. Essentially, our arguments were similar to those contained in the Baker-Hamilton Report.

I believe the adage that “partisanship stops at the waters edge,” especially in wartime, is a good general rule to follow. Have internal debate in all government institutions, including Congress, and then close ranks to maintain national will and unity of purpose. In certain situations, e.g., WWII, this may require co-opting the media; perhaps even censorship. When to abandon this principle is

a controversial matter. In addition to national will, we must also consider the potential of undermining troop morale and giving aid and comfort to our adversaries. These must be weighed in the calculus.

Stifling of public dissent is less controversial when there is a "clear and present danger," as in WWII. It is more problematical in other situations. Arousing the public to make sacrifices for national security is difficult in the absence of such clear and present danger. When a government uses deception to go to war, as President Lyndon Johnson did in the Vietnam conflict and President George W. Bush did to gather support for the Iraq war, it is difficult to make a case for uncritical support for that venture when the going gets tough. Apparently the Bush administration believed the conflict would be short and sweet like the 1991 Gulf War. If indeed the "Mission Accomplished" boast had been valid, there is no doubt Bush would have been immune from criticism.

The Iraqi War was not honestly debated in Congress; thus, we had no political mechanism for correcting misguided policy other than the administration's recognition of error and in-course correction. There was no evidence that the administration had any inclination to do that. The administration made it clear that it would not listen to private dissent of its policies. There was little likelihood that the Bush administration would have ever admitted error in the absence of public pressure, and there would have been no public pressure if the public had been kept in the dark. When Congress tried to exert its constitutional authority to change policy, members were accused of "not supporting the troops." I talked to members of both parties who asked me, "how do we answer that charge?" My short answer was, "with political courage." One Republican told me that, in private, most of her colleagues disagreed with the Iraq policy, but were afraid to vote their convictions. She then told me that it would be ironic that she would be accused of that when she voted the next day. Ironic because her husband is a USMA grad and retired colonel and her son was at her home that day after graduating from USMA the week before. He would then be deploying to Iraq. Incidentally, she won re-election by almost 70%.

Many of my colleagues in the retired military community anguished over the duty to "support the troops" while disagreeing fundamentally with our foreign policy in general and the Iraqi War in particular. Many of us believe the Iraq War has nothing to do with the "war on terrorism," except that it is counter productive to that wider effort.

As was the case during the Vietnam conflict, do we retired military stand silent even though we are convinced that we are in the midst of misguided policy that has long-term negative consequences? By giving uncritical endorsement of the policy, we in effect jump into the hole we have dug and help shovel deeper. Or do we believe the American public needs to hear our dissent so they can make a more informed decision? This is not an easy dilemma to solve, but some of us have decided it is patriotic to speak out.

A 1973 survey of 108 Army generals who had commanded in Vietnam, conducted by BG Doug Kinnard, showed that only 14% believed the war had been worthwhile. Another 25% said it would have been worthwhile if it had been done differently. Some of this group believed it should have been limited to an advisory effort, others that we should have employed more troops. The vast majority said we should not have gone in. I know of only one senior officer who spoke publicly to that effect: General David Shoup, former Commandant of the Marine Corps. In a 1969 article, he expressed regret that he did not speak out in the early sixties, when he realized we were making a mistake. Should more of the generals have gone public? The same question could be asked of senior civilian leaders in the Pentagon. Records show that many of them concluded in the early sixties that we had little chance of success. For example, the Pentagon Papers revealed a March 1965 memo from a senior civilian official stating our objectives in Vietnam: 70% to avoid humiliation; 20% to prevent china's hegemony over Vietnam; and 10% to provide a better life for the Vietnamese. (The action officer for this study, Bob Gard, can correct me if I am wrong). Should Congress have had access to this assessment? Should the public?

The media, which has a constitutional duty to inform the public and act as the watchdog over the government, shares the dilemma of military officers. Initially, the media erred in favor of endorsing government actions that have led this country into a quagmire that has alienated most of the world and squandered the good will that we enjoyed in the aftermath of 9-11. Should they have risked undermining national will in 2002 and early 2003 by challenging the march to war?

Congress and the administration react to public pressure. Public pressure can be based on non-rational emotions, misinformation, accurate information, or any other combination thereof. It is best that it be based on the best information available. Retired officers should join in the process of informing the people. I hope we can do it in a civil manner recognizing that men of good will can, and do, disagree.

In April 1816 naval commander Stephen Decatur toasted his victory over the Barbary pirates with these words: "**Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong.**" Carl Schurz, who was a Major General in the Union Army and was later elected to the Senate, revised the Quote in a speech to the Senate. His version is, "**Our country, right or wrong. When right, it ought be kept right; when wrong, to be put right.**" Senator Schurz had it more correct for a democracy than did Decatur. Years later, when we were beating the drums for the Spanish-American War, Schurz offered the following observation on patriotism:

The man who in times of popular excitement boldly and unflinchingly resists hot-tempered clamor for an unnecessary war, and thus exposes himself to the opprobrious imputation of a lack of patriotism or of courage, to the end of saving his country from a great calamity, is, as to "loving and faithfully serving his country," at least as good a patriot as the hero of the most daring feat of arms, and a far better one than those who, with an ostentatious pretense of superior patriotism, cry for war before it is needed, especially if then they let others do the fighting.

– Carl Schurz, *April, 1898*

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