

Op-Eds

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4 Soldiers Down

One of the most sacred, and most cherished freedoms we enjoy in a democracy is “Freedom of Speech;” the freedom to express one’s opinion without fear of persecution, reciprocity, or incarceration. As a democratic society we do not award the right of free speech based on aristocracy, religion, education, breeding, ethnicity, or political persuasion.

In high school I was introduced to a profound quotation, attributed to an educated Frenchman, which has been the foundation of my belief in free speech and its necessary place in a viable democracy.

“I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Voltaire, author and philosopher, expressed that sentiment in the seventeenth hundreds. It is a tenet of democracy, paraphrased by the framers of the Constitution in the First Amendment. It is paramount that we embrace the right of free speech and, indeed, defend it with our lives, if necessary, to preserve democracy. Never did I believe we would have to fight our government to retain our freedoms.

In an ironic twist, lives may have been given for the right of free speech. Not to preserve the right, but because of exercising it. With the deaths, of three brave men—most recently Staff Sergeant Yance Gray, and Sergeant Omar Mora in Iraq, and the much reported death of Pat Tillman, in Afghanistan, ‘free speech’ may have come under assault. A fourth young man is in critical condition after being shot in the head. Coincidentally all four spoke out against this war.

Was it coincidence that a true American hero was shot to death in Afghanistan by friendly fire shortly after telling his parents that he believed the war in Iraq was wrong? Or, should a reasonable person be expected to believe, without question, that the mishaps of three of the seven soldier’s who spoke out about the realities of the war in Iraq in an Op-ed piece in the New York Times, *“The War as We Saw It,”* Aug 19, 2007, were merely coincidences?

Is free speech under siege?

As a disabled veteran I fully understand that in order to maintain discipline in the military, certain parts of the First Amendment must be suspended or restricted for the safety of the men and women that serve and for the protection of the country. But never—NEVER— should truthful ‘free speech’ be silenced. And never...should it lead to death.

If Pat Tillman’s mother, Mary, is to be believed, and I do believe her, her son saw that the war in Iraq was wrong

and, for his honesty, paid the ultimate price. Did the government order his elimination, cover it up and then, disgustingly, use him to promote their illegitimate war? Is our government involved in the recent deaths of Staff Sergeant Gray and Sergeant Mora, and in the shooting of Staff Sergeant Murphy?

Is the truth important in our decision whether to stay in Iraq or leave? Yes it is! How do we get at the truth? Who do we believe in the face of such contrarian views.

General Petraeus testified to Congress over the past few days and painted a rosy picture of Iraq. As he was asking Congress and the American people to accept his version of the truth, that the surge was working, two 'real' heroes died in a suspicious vehicle accident. Their opinion of the progress in Iraq was contrary to both the administration's and the administration's mouthpiece. While the Democrats in the hearings were polite, and the Republicans lobbed softballs to the General and the Ambassador, two brave young men died and one lies critical in the hospital.

The 'right,' who so easily sent our brave young men and women into harm's way, accepted General Petraeus's report without question. Not one asked him about the well written Op-ed, describing the conditions 'on the ground,' nor asked if he could explain the contrarian view expressed by the seven heroic men of the 82nd Airborne Division. Their heroism can be unquestioned, but no one on the 'right' thought their opinion was important. Were they just uninformed, or was it a failure on their part to ask about a contrarian view. It is a reminder of their impotence getting us into this war. A failure to ask the 'hard' questions.

Those on the right side of the dial immediately began their assault on those that would question the validity of General Petraeus's testimony. In typical fashion Joe Hicks, on his show this past Saturday, did a segment on the testimony of the highly-decorated General. Mr. Hicks questioned how 'liberals,' could question his integrity and credentials. Because this is America and free speech is still a covenant of this democracy, I can answer him in two words. Colin Powell.

I, as most Americans, have the highest regard, the utmost respect for General Powell. But I have to admit as I watched him in front of the UN Security Council, felt sorry for him. With that one presentation an honorable and trusted soldier lost some, if not most, of his credibility. So, yes Joe Hicks, we—equally patriotic Americans—have the right, even the patriotic duty to question General Petraeus, especially when you and your colleagues fail, either on purpose, or through your uninformed naiveté, to address informative contrarian views such as "*The War as We Saw It.*"

Mr. Hicks also failed his listeners by avoiding the comments of General Petraeus's superior, Admiral William Fallon, CENTCOM Commander, who referred to his junior officer as "an ass kissing chicken shit." So, Mr. Hicks, as they so often do on the right side of the dial, painted a one-sided, disingenuous picture of the facts; one that would give false credibility to a tunnel-visioned view of the war. Freedom of Speech does not apply to one side of the dial or the other, it belongs to all Americans. Every informed American, right or left, who has discussed, mentioned, read, or argued General Petraeus's testimony needs to read "*The War as We Saw It.*" It is no longer acceptable that we remain an ignorant electorate and continue regurgitating the same uninformed talking points.

As a patriot it is difficult for me to believe that our government would ever take part in denying free speech, but given our history, and the actions of this administration I am now cynical and unsure of what the government would do to protect their policies, secrets, or lies.

Though I believe in the overall integrity of our military—of our country—I am compelled to defend, to the death if necessary, these brave young American's right to free speech. I have asked my two representatives from California, Ed Royce and Gary Miller, to launch an investigation into the suspicious deaths of Staff Sergeant

Yance T. Gray and Sergeant Omar Mora, and the cause of injuries to Staff Sergeant Jeremy Murphy. What they find may prevent further erosion of our democratic freedoms, and restore integrity to a much maligned legislative body.

Free speech is under attack in this country. Every American, right or left, should be concerned and should do all they can to protect the freedoms that have made this country so great. Everyone should ask their Congressmen and Senators to seek the truth in these matters and all matters that may take away their rights as an American citizen. We deserve a country we can be proud of, not one we must continually question, not one where we must fear our government.

Not one that draws frighteningly closer to facism.