

Civil liberties have increasingly been **eroded** in the name of national security, while dissent — and **dissenters** — are being stalked and skewered, spied on, and scapegoated.

As renowned journalist Edward R. Murrow once warned: **“We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty.”** Only by speaking out can we safeguard our nation’s legacy of debate, dialogue, and democracy.

In the wake of 9/11, has dissent become un-American? Most of us would say no, at least in theory. But reality paints a more dubious picture. While unity prevailed in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, it didn’t last. As the war in Iraq began, attacks on its critics and other dissenters came from all quarters.

Consider the 2003 uproar over the Dixie Chicks. After its lead singer made an anti-war remark, the band’s CD was booted off the air. At the close of 2005, Rep. John Murtha (D-PA) was chastised when he called for a pullout from Iraq — despite his top-Democrat position on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, 37-year Marine record, and two Purple Hearts. And recently, students at the University of California were offered a \$100 bounty for informing on professors who made anti-war remarks.

Unfortunately, government at all levels has been complicit, if not outright active, in the movement to chill dissent. Demonstrators have been herded into “free speech zones,” as if the rest of the country’s turf were not protected by the First Amendment. Modern-day red squads on local police departments have gone after the usual suspects — Quakers — and some new ones — bicycle advocates. For its part, the New York City police department has admitted conducting surveillance of events and planting undercover officers who not only observe

what is going on, but who actively participate in rallies and demonstrations.

On the other coast, the California National Guard has joined the home-front fight against terror by spying on locals, including participants in a 2005 Mother’s Day rally. The targeted groups — who ironically called on Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to bring the guard’s troops home from Iraq — included the Raging Grannies (median age: 72), Gold Star Families for Peace, and CODEPINK, a national women’s peace group.

The federal government, meanwhile, has squelched dissent and free speech in a variety of ways. The Pentagon’s Threat and Local Observation Notice (TALON) is a database of “potential terrorist threats” that has identified an unknown number of protesters. The FBI also examines electronic data — 30,000 customer databases each year — and has ramped up its surveillance of peace, environmental, and other protest groups while urging local police departments to do the same. And under new Bush administration guidelines, US residents and visitors not alleged to be terrorists or spies may still be targeted for clandestine scrutiny.

Using a standard known as “ideological exclusion,” US border authorities paint dissenting immigrants as potential terrorists, barring their entry into the United States. And refugees from repressive regimes like Burma are stopped



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from settling in the US by American law that now makes no distinction between terrorist groups and legitimate resistance.

Even the most personal of places — homes, classrooms, and offices — are watched. A clinical nurse specialist at the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) who sent a letter criticizing the war to a local newspaper in September 2005 was investigated for sedition. And though no evidence was found that she had used it to compose the letter, her VA computer was seized. In December of that year, the American Civil Liberties Union filed suit on behalf of a Florida high school student who refused to say the Pledge of Allegiance because, he said, “the real meaning of the flag — freedom, liberty, and equality — has been tarnished by the recent policies of our government.” His teacher cursed him in front of his class, and the school stated that he could not refuse to say the pledge without a note from his parents.

Historically speaking, the government’s commitment to free speech in tumultuous times has often been shaky — from the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 to the Japanese internment of World War II to the McCarthy-era loyalty programs. All have taught us something about the dangers caused by compromising First Amendment rights and interpreting dissent as disloyalty. The stakes are high, and the strategy is clear: Use it or lose it. Now more than ever, we must exercise free speech in order to save it. >

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