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Tasteless talk and terrorism

Suzanne Fields

"Loose lips sink ships" was a popular admonition during World War II, addressed sharply to anyone tempted in a weak moment to spill the beans and help the enemy by supplying information, however innocently intended.

My uncle in the Army was stationed in Bermuda. He tells of a buddy who wanted to tell his mom and dad where he was stationed, but there was a rule, rigidly enforced, against that. So he wrote a letter telling them to look under the postage stamp on the envelope, where he had written "Bermuda." All the outgoing mail was censored, and the censor could read, too. The buddy's parents never got that message. Some people could be dumb as well as careless.

The admonition is relevant today when we're caught up in a national dialogue about the limits of free speech in our war against terror. Some limits are surely warranted — you don't write a military secret under the stamp — but anger and frustration can sometimes lead to erring on the wrong side of good intentions.

Bill Maher, the host of "Politically Incorrect," stretched remarks about whether lobbing cruise missiles is "cowardly" to over-the-top tastelessness. Ari Fleisher, the president's press spokesman, made the graver error when he stretched scolding, fair enough, into a chilling rebuke suggesting curbs on the First Amendment: "All Americans . . . need to watch what they do, and this is not a time for remarks like that."

Tastelessness and vulgarity ought not to be confused with a lack of patriotism. Tasteless Hitler jokes are all the rage in the Broadway musical, "The Producers," and if Mel Brooks should add a satiric remark or two about Osama bin Laden, audiences should judge the result, not the government.

The First Amendment was not written to protect the dignity of motherhood or the joys of apple pie (though both have endured some attacks from cloners and fat-fighters). Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis got it right: "It is the function of speech to free men from the bondage of irrational fears." Free speech is sunlight for the intellect and a catalyst for reasonable debate, so you might think that the First Amendment's fiercest defenders would be found in the groves of academe. Alas, not necessarily.

"If ever there was a time to notice the inconceivable double

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standard when it comes to protection of free speech and association, it is now," says Thor L. Halvorssen, executive director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), an organization that takes on right or left when free speech is threatened on campus. Consider the case of the young woman who cried "harassment" at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. A professor voiced support for U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, a student argued that the United States was to blame. Incredible but true, when the student complained that the professor's position made her "uncomfortable" the professor was visited by university police and the provost.

A conservative Christian professor provoked a heated debate in his political science class at Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, Calif., when he opened the class with the question: "Why do Muslims condemn the terrorist attacks in New York, but never denounce the terrorist attacks in Israel?" Muslim students complained they were singled out for discrimination and the professor felt it necessary to apologize. No one bothered to say what was wrong with the question, when intellectual debate is what college is all about, or should be.

Students at Lehigh University were told to keep American flags out of sight lest they offend Middle Eastern students. "This just shows the unconscionable hypocrisy of a university [where no one] would ever ask anyone to take down a flag, be it a gay pride flag, a United Nations flag or a flag of any sort," says Mr. Halvorssen.

But sensibilities do change. No one's burning American flags at the University of California at Berkeley as they did in the 1960s. Not yet, anyway. Instead more than 12,000 students attended a memorial service on campus; almost as many staged a "Rally for America," where students chanted "U.S.A., U.S.A." About 2,000 students showed up for an anti-retaliation demonstration.

Professor Paul Kennedy urged Yale students to "understand" that people elsewhere hate America for the power and influence of the American culture, but the Yale Daily News responded to the terrorist atrocities from a very different perspective. "After September 11, 2001, we came of age as a generation," wrote the editors. "We agreed on an agenda. We faced the same enemy. And now the government is asking us: 'Will we serve?' "

Their answer: "We must answer the calling of our time — if we don't, who will?"

Ah, the times. They are a-changin'.

Suzanne Fields is a columnist for The Washington Times.

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