

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Peter Schwartzman

Will someone in the media stand up for freedom? Two have...

We supposedly live in the freest country in the world. Our national anthem declares that we are in "the land of the free." Our founders knew the importance of certain freedoms and they expressed this boldly by making the First Amendment address the "freedom of religion, press, and expression." Historically, there appears to have been a great emphasis on freedom in the United States. However, currently, do we understand what freedom is and how we can maintain it?

The best way to respect and honor freedom is to exercise it. Among the best ways to exercise it is to celebrate the First Amendment by writing or speaking up about important issues and taking positions that may be controversial or unpopular. Journalists serve as the intermediary between the public and the politicians. A working democracy requires a media that seeks and speaks the truth. Hence, journalists that epitomize this responsibility to the public need to be admired and defended. In this vein, do you know of the work of Helen Thomas or Amy Goodman? (More on them soon.)

Historically, Americans have demonstrated their sense of freedom by speaking forth in the face of injustice. Many of our nation's established heroes did this. Thomas Jefferson did so in the case of unfair taxes levied by the British Empire. Abraham Lincoln did similarly on the issue of slavery, calling it immoral one-hundred-and-fifty years ago while on the grounds of Knox College. Alice Paul did it during World War I on the matter of women's suffrage. More recently, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke against both racial injustice as well as a brutal and unjust war in Vietnam.

Fortunately we remember some of these people and even observe a holiday for one of them (this week, in fact). Unfortunately, as is the case with Alice Walker, there are hundreds of other heroes that largely go unmentioned in mainstream history books. It is almost as if their contribution has been wiped from our collective memory. More tragically, it has become anti-American to criticize or call into question the actions of the U.S. government or its military. Yet, any honest assessment of U.S. history suggests that such queries and criticism are often warranted. And it is precisely those individuals that speak up, and as a result endure ridicule or worse, that we are so indebted to. Sadly, too often the important messages being communicated by these questioners or critics are lost in the drone of self-righteousness and status-pro politics that most people hardly hear their remonstrations.

This is why it is so important to acknowledge Helen Thomas and Amy Goodman now. They are (and have been) at the forefront of challenging the status quo. As reporters for two very different arms of the media, they have been persistently asking the tough questions over the years. Are enough of us listening to them? Are enough of us celebrating and defending these patriots who defend freedom?

Ms. Thomas, as a correspondent for United Press International (UPI) for over fifty years, and most recently a member of the White House Press Corps, has had the opportunity



to ask generations of U.S. presidents many questions on behalf of the public. And she has not shirked this responsibility. Penetrating and provocative, Helen has the gumption and the sense of urgency that all journalists need to get at the heart of an issue. Former White House Press Secretary, Scott McClellan, described Helen as "not afraid to ask the tough

the tough questions and hold people accountable for the decisions that are made" (Interview). On many occasions Helen drilled President George W. Bush about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Sadly, during his last press conference, this past week, President Bush failed to call on Helen, the most senior member of the Corps. Perhaps he wanted to end on a high note, and avoid "troublesome" inquiries. Helen says she would have asked the President, "Why do you continue to support the killing in Gaza" (Interview)? Now in her 80s, Helen is still as feisty as she has ever been. Her honesty and clarity is something to behold. She protects the civil liberties for all each day by speaking up.

No less courageous, Amy Goodman deserves our utmost respect as well. Amy has risked her life covering human rights violations of the worst kind in Nigeria and East Timor. She co-founded *Democracy Now!* *The War and Peace Report* in 1996. This one-hour news program, which can be listened to on hundreds of radio stations nationwide as well as watched on Free Speech TV and Link TV, represents a hard-hitting representation and discussion of all things political. (Daily shows can be watched/heard at www.democracynow.org or, in Galesburg, on 90.7 WVKC at 6 PM). Amy's co-authored book, a New York Times bestseller, *The Exception to the Rule: Exposing Oily, Politicians, War Profiteers, and the Media That Love Them* is a must read. She also writes a weekly column, "Breaking the Sound Barrier," and in her first essay, she clarified that her column would "include voices so often excluded, people whose views the media mostly ignore, issues they distort and even ridicule." Amy exemplifies what broadcast journalism can do to educate people and bring serious issues to light. How do we treat Ms. Goodman? Well, she was arrested this summer while covering the demonstrations at the Republican National Convention held in Minnesota? On what charge? All charges were mysteriously dropped soon afterwards.

So where do Helen and Amy fit into our lives? Well, we are in a prime position to defend those who speak for peace and justice today. Whether they are defending the rights of the afflicted, the wrongly-accused, homosexuals, single mothers, etc., these brave individuals are people we need to recognize and applaud. One day in the not so distant future, history will clarify for everyone that these people were heroes of their time. Why not celebrate their heroism now rather than later? (Just this past week Amy Goodman interviewed Helen Thomas. What an event it was. The show aired, Tuesday, 1/13/09, and can be downloaded at www.democracynow.org.)

Interview. *Democracy Now*. Daily News Show. (1/13/09)