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## **Ending the War in Vietnam**

**By: Joel Rogers, Guest Editorial**

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Note: the version here is an updated version of the one that ran in the Capital Times.

My column last week got some strong reactions, as those of you who read it might have guessed. For those who didn't, all I said was that, as the United States contemplates a response to the terror of Sept. 11, we would do well to remember that we've exported a fair amount of terror ourselves over the years, and also recognize that our national policies over the past generation, both at home and abroad, have been too single-mindedly dedicated to the liberty to seek profit at the expense of other social and political concerns.

The first point I thought relevant to understanding why anyone abroad - assuming, as certainly seems likely, the attack came from abroad - might even for a moment have tolerated in their presence those who did this. The second is relevant to thinking about how to build a better system of national and international security, which will require, in addition to the police and military, economic and social institutions that are more widely rewarding, and passably just, than those we have recently put in place.

I claimed no novelty for these points. I only said that progressives should make certain they were entered in national political discussion of what the United States should now do, and insist in the first place that we have that discussion.

This message went down well enough here in liberal Madison, and I got various "glad you said it, someone had to" and "well done!" sorts of comments. Though, I should say, not only those. My favorite strong negative came from someone who wrote simply: "Dear Mr. Rogers: Give some blood, maybe it will make you feel better. On second thought, give it all and make us feel better. Cheers." This, you've got to admit, is sort of funny, a witty way to express fierce disagreement. Certainly I found it more engaging than the usual name-calling and unexplained condemnations, which also came over the transom: "gutless wonder," "worthless faggot," "you don't deserve to live here," and so on. Thank goodness I'm not an Arab-American citizen, much less one of the millions of new immigrants now here without a green card. It might have actually gotten serious.

But then the column went national, and even international - owing to the good services of *The Nation* magazine, with which I've long been associated, which carried it on its popular Web site. And this unleashed a real torrent of commentary, including much written by the more professional slanderers of the right.

Typical here was John Podhoretz, writing in the *New York Post* (for older readers, yes, Norman's kid, whom Rupert Murdoch has gifted with various platforms, including this), who made the classic smear move on me of insisting that any critic of his country must also hate it. He thus found me particularly "loathsome" for prefacing my remarks by saying how thoroughly revolted and outraged I was by the terror in New York City and Washington, since such sentiments, apparently, can only be held by those who otherwise are silent, or only approving, on their country's use of force. So, connecting the dots: to criticize is to hate your country, and any such country-hater who otherwise gives sign of actually loving his country must be insincere. And someone as loathsome as that, during this time of sorrow, shouldn't be listened to at all.

Now it is just this sort of easy argument-ending slander that I hope we can finally get beyond after Sept. 11. The slander that trades on a certain feeling many have about progressives in this country, which the right will endlessly try to stir, and that progressives for their part have probably not done enough - indeed, have obviously not done enough - to relieve. And that is that at some deep level progressives don't actually have much affection for this country, or even deep feeling and affection for their fellow Americans, and that in foreign policy they are forever committed to the proposition that the United States may never legitimately defend itself by force, or otherwise use force in the achievement of policy aims.

I think these assumptions, as the background structure of national discussion about foreign policy (and for that matter domestic policy too), go back to the Vietnam War. For American national politics, certainly, they are that war's most enduring, and still crippling, legacy.

On the right, tracing back to that period, is the implicit claim that much of the generation that came of age during it were cowards, who simply veiled this cowardice in principled opposition, and who now, as middle-aged adults, remain a cancer in this country for their same habit of self-indulgent and self-pitying lying. For many, Bill Clinton here provided a near perfect embodiment of the type.

On the left, also tracing to that period, is the view among at least some that any rational discussion of the use of force is so impossible in America - so completely corrupted by the power of the corporate and other interests actually running this country - that they do not need even to develop a view on the matter. That it is enough and indeed recommended, merely and forever, to be in opposition to any use of force. Functionally, this amounts to pacifism, though not a traditional pacifism which is an objection to any use of force, but a sort of situational pacifism born of political assessment of the conditions of debate at home. But it certainly announces the left as not "in" any serious discussion.

Whatever their origin, it is particularly urgent that both stereotypes - and of course they are only that on both sides; I recognize the existence of exceptions - need to be discarded now. It is time for the Vietnam War finally to end. The left needs to be let back into foreign policy discussion in earnest, and it needs to push to be in it by having something to say that also takes security interests seriously. And the old left and new left,

split since that time, need to find some common ground and confidence of purpose stating a positive vision of American society, not merely a critical one, that we can again compete for against the right - in real competition, that is, seeking support from the majority of the society, not just more PC splendor in our isolation from it.

This country needs, and our fellow Americans are owed, a left that serious. For without it we shall never have the discussion of post- Cold War foreign policy that we now urgently need to have, much less a discussion of security issues that recognizes the need for anything more than more satellite intercepts and bombs.

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see [www.cows.org](http://www.cows.org) and [www.sustainingwisconsin.org](http://www.sustainingwisconsin.org).

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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