



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 31, 2010

Wars Abroad No Defense Against Tyranny at Home

On the editorial page of my local newspaper this Memorial Day, there appears a two-panel cartoon. This first panel shows a small boy in summer attire, his baseball cap on backwards as the fashion of the day dictates. The lad, with hot dog and bun on his plate, is standing next to a man at an outdoor grill, busy frying hamburgers and hot dogs.

"How much did all this cost?" the boy asks. The next panel shows the answer: rows of tombstones with a small U.S. flag in the foreground.



It has become a national habit to attribute all of life's blessings in this treasured land to the supreme sacrifice made by those who fought and died in one or another of the many wars our nation has waged since declaring our independence from the British crown. It is a sentiment expressed not only on patriotic holidays — Memorial Day, Veterans Day, the Fourth of July — but on other occasions as well, as something that gives meaning to all our civic virtues.

On the morning of the New Hampshire primary in 2008, a listener called a local talk show and said he hoped people listening would get out and vote that day because "that's what our troops are fighting for in Iraq." I couldn't resist the temptation to call in and offer a contrarian's point of view.

"I can't remember the last time anyone in Iraq tried to stop me from voting," I said.

"Yeah, all right," the show's host said grudgingly.

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Chances are good that no one celebrating Memorial Day today can remember a time when anyone in Iraq interfered with a family picnic, backyard barbecue, or a parade down Main Street of any city, town or hamlet in America. The point here is not to disparage the enjoyment of a holiday or demean the sacrifice or the courage of those who have taken up arms at their nation's behest. It is, rather, to challenge the assumption that everything that is good and noble in America is somehow attributable to our willingness to send young men and women off to fight in far-off lands, often for dubious causes and with little provocation.

In the summer of 2004, when the war in Iraq had become a divisive issue in American politics, Gov. Zell Miller of Georgia, a Democrat, spoke at the Republican National Convention and drew thunderous ovations from the Grand Old Party faithful as he paid homage to the soldier as the guarantor and defender of freedom.



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"And our soldiers don't just give freedom abroad, they preserve it for us here at home. For it has been said so truthfully that it is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us the freedom of the press. It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech. It is the soldier, not the agitator, who has given us the freedom to protest. It is the soldier who salutes the flag, serves beneath the flag, whose coffin is draped by the flag who gives that protester the freedom he abuses to burn that flag."

It is about such rhetoric that the word "claptrap" was coined. They are lines that are easy to applaud so long as one does not think about their meaning. And political conventions are not designed to stimulate thought. Those wildly cheering Miller's words that night probably never asked themselves if reporters, poets, or protestors in America would be any less free if our President had not sent our armed forces halfway around the world to invade Iraq and overthrow its government. The arguments for and against that war have been made and no doubt will be made for years to come. But if the war can be justified it will have to be on grounds other than a defense of our own freedom.

Our government has a duty to provide for the common defense of the United States, but not to, as John Quincy Adams said, go about the world "in search of monsters to destroy." The freedoms of which Miller spoke (except for what he rightly described as the abuse of freedom in flag burning) are written into a Bill of Rights that is directed not against foreign powers, but our own government. "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." (Amendment I)

And when Congress abridges the freedom of speech and of the press, as with the Sedition Act during World War I, soldiers fighting abroad are no defense against that assault on freedom. When the Supreme Court presumes to tell us when, where, and under what circumstances "We the people" may offer a public prayer, the soldier is in no position to defend the free exercise of religion. And when a President of the United States claims the authority to lock up suspected terrorists, including American citizens, indefinitely and without trial, the soldiers at his command are no defense against the usurpation.

In fact, it is while we are at war that our freedoms are in greatest jeopardy, not from governments or organizations we might be fighting abroad, but from our own government here at home. It was during our Civil War that President Lincoln ordered the suspension of writs of habeas corpus, arrested thousands of civilians, shut down newspapers, and jailed editors and publishers for speaking or printing views that the government deemed a hindrance to its prosecution of the war. During World War I, more than 1,500 Americans were imprisoned by their own government under the Espionage and Sedition Acts for such crimes as protesting America's joining of the war and circulating flyers opposing the draft. After Pearl Harbor, Japanese-Americans were rounded up and imprisoned because of their national origin. During the Vietnam War, government agents regularly infiltrated suspect groups of citizens to spy on those who had been speaking out and demonstrating against the war.

"When a nation is at war," wrote Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in a landmark Supreme Court decision (*Schenck v. United States*), "many things that might be said in time of peace are such a hindrance to its effort that their utterance will not be endured so long as men fight and no court could regard them as protected by any constitutional right."

War, in other words, renders our constitutional liberties doubtful at best. Wars abroad are no defense against tyranny at home. All too often they provide a pretext for it.



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Memorial Day is, to be sure, a fitting time for the decoration of graves and the appreciation of the heroic sacrifices so many of our countrymen have made in answering our nation's call to arms. But at a time when we are in a vaguely defined "war on terror" that offers no prospect of ever ending, we might also remember the cautionary words of one of the great architects of our Constitution:

"No nation," said James Madison, "could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare."



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