

JUST FAITH AND ACTION:
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Confronting the silence

Noise dominates here on Capitol Hill. Something is always being said by someone, be it advocates, politicians, grassroots. Whether strident or calm, thoughtful or propagandistic, visionary or atavistic, distortion or fact, noise is constant. Noisiness provides the appearance of debate. Whether or not today's crises may have brought us into deeper discussion about fundamental values, democratic deliberations go on, and all the noise is supposed to prove that that is so. And yet there is something odd about now. The kind of noise that dominates is really, in terms of meaning, silence. Moreover, the kind of noise that dominates has – as its intent – to silence.

It is not just that the American media has failed miserably to provide thoughtful coverage of our world and the varying ways people interpret the events of our world, which it has. When Tom Brokaw, on NBC's evening news, can call President Bush the nation's "First Friend" and can broadcast "news" surrounded by dozens of flags, it is legitimate to suspect that his broadcast will encourage little critical thought. Nor is it just that this administration – as most administrations – wants to control the news in its favor... though the comment by an unnamed US official discussing terrorism issues at the UN that "at some point people are just going to have to trust the US" to do the right thing remains a remarkable testimony to control. Our government's claim is for either approval, or silence.

Nor is it that folks in and out of the faith-based communities don't have something useful to say. Our prophetic role – sometimes done well, sometimes poorly – calls us to proclaim an alternative vision of justice and human dignity, and we are persisting, in this political climate, as we have in others. And while those of us in justice advocacy will always bear a good deal of responsibility for not getting our message out, I think there's more going on these days that transforms noise into silence.

What is happening now is that from virtually every source with access to power – and thus with the ability to communicate broadly – we Americans receive the message that we are all in agreement. Unity is the word of the day. President Bush's popularity somehow proves unanimity. We are on the side of right – that's the message – and explicitly others are evil, and implicitly critics are pawns of evil. As a result, critical thought about our place in the world, about our strengths and our failings, about policy that embraces justice and upholds the human spirit... well, that critical thought is silenced.

Nowhere is that clearer than in African policy. Adequate support to fight the AIDS pandemic, effective legislation to control conflict diamonds, an end to the use of landmines, debt cancellation, a meaningful commitment to development assistance – these are now "debated" in the negative here in Washington. Americans know better. Even now surveys suggest a public willingness to make sacrifices to serve the common good, in education and needs of the elderly domestically, for example, and in environmental protection and poverty reduction worldwide. But when an administration such as ours wants no questions asked, and a mainstream media such as ours doesn't ask them, the noise we continue to hear isn't discourse anymore. The noise we hear is just noise. That's all. And we've got to name it before we can confront it.

*Yours faithfully,
Leon Spencer*

If there are others you would like us to send these reflections to, please pass their names and addresses on to us. Alternatively, if these reflections are unhelpful, just let us know and we'll remove you from our list.

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