

Thursday, May 10, 2007

### **Contributing to social justice never goes out of style.**

When frustrated over the slowness in achieving social justice, I remember that accumulated feathers will sink the boat. A Part -- but only a part -- of my whole frustration with the current Bush II wars in Iraq, against terrorism, and against drugs is that such a substantial percentage of people supporting the Bush II wars have little to no memory of the government's countless failures and injustices during Vietnam, and its accompanying suppression of demonstrators while the counterculture pushed to reverse the formica forced-uniformity and complacency that clashed with doing one's own thing. In fact, the vast majority of American soldiers in Iraq were born after the resignation of Nixon less than a year before the United States fully withdrew from Vietnam. For Nixon, democracy was quite the inconvenience, unless it was going to get him and his loyalists elected. Here is how the Vietnam war period and beyond influenced my own views of justice, my career path, and my insistence on finding a way to fight for justice for the long haul. I was born in 1963, and lived through the hippie era when too young to understand it beyond long hair, peace signs, and antiwar demonstrations. Nevertheless, I was heavily influenced by this period and beyond, during which not only the hippies were many, but when racism and sexism were being heavily and widely fought, otherwise conformist and complacent people spoke out against the Vietnam war, Nixon gave cohesion to all who detested his presidency, and Ozzie and Harriet no longer could make big bucks during primetime. Later on, I dreamed of coming of age during the hippie era, but recognized that it was the worst of times sprinkled with some emerging best of times. Ultimately, I naturally gravitated to criminal and Constitutional defense after growing up from 1963 forward, being encouraged to think for myself (but sometimes being simultaneously urged to play the game (I'm still trying to figure out what game that is, who created it, where its boxtop can be found, and whether I like even one of its gamepieces), obsessing over human and civil rights through my activity first with Amnesty International and next the American Civil Liberties Union, and seeing as a public defender lawyer how overcontrolling and dehumanizing is the criminal prosecution and court system, particularly when it comes to poor people and those too poor to pay for a lawyer but too rich to qualify for court-appointed counsel. On the path to my present, I tried to discover how much I could overlap my obsession with social justice, my interest in making a financially comfortable living, and the possibility of not needing to reject the entire establishment. Before I learned how severely atrocious were American injustices in Vietnam, I dabbled briefly in high school about whether to seek admission to West Point (the idea was mine alone) where my father went during Ike's presidency, followed by dabbling more seriously than that in college with emigrating to Israel, which has compulsory military service. Israel's economic and social hardships together with the many Israeli government actions that I felt were too expansionist and hawkish ultimately led me to put emigrating on a backburner; after seeing the Israeli military's disproportionately excessive response to the first intifada, I was relieved that I did not emigrate. For a year before law school, in 1985, I worked with the Irving Trust Company (headquartered at One Wall Street) in the belly of the Wall Street capitalist beast that loved the money flowing during Reagan's reign. I know by now that enlightened capitalists exist, but on Wall Street I often felt like I was searching for a needle in the haystack, including with the unapologetic and very open racially insensitive comments of too many of my colleagues in the financial auditing department of Irving Trust, even when not at happy hour, of which there were many. For personal growth, a great benefit to me at this job was rubbing elbows with a much larger cross section of people than I had ever dealt with before on a daily basis, from people who would never go to college, to a loveable near-retired security guard who once proclaimed at the prospect of overtime pay "I used to eat that up, but if I haven't made it by now, I'm never going to make it," to working people trying to make ends meet each week for their families, to the hundreds and even thousands of people passing daily on the street, to plenty of higher-income people who still had more of an affinity for pizza and beer than for Beef Wellington at the executive dining room. When I saw so many people working just to make ends meet, I asked myself the extent to which it is or is not a luxury to work for social justice; my answer became that it is a necessity, even if working for social justice were part-time or piecemeal, so long as each person focuses on doing no harm to others in daily life. In the end, I identify a lot with the hippies in Easy Rider when confronted by the men who would end up murdering them, where one of the hippies responded to the taunts about their long hair by pointing out that they were not complaining about the pickup truckers' short hair, so why give a hassle about long hair. However, the pickup truckers saw the hippies' very existence as such a threat and a progression to the unknown that they shot them dead in broad daylight on the open road even though they were powerless to keep society in a static condition, let alone to go backwards in a time machine. Today, long hair is widely accepted, the peace sign has been integrated into commercial America without much meaning, and the movement against racism and sexism is much more widely embraced than when the Voting Rights Act was passed. Nevertheless, continuing injustice by the government, including those detailed at the start of this article, feeds on a society that remains largely complacent, with a substantial percentage financially and socially well off enough so as not want to join the activist-rocking boat lest that interfere with their membership in comfortable society. One does not need to reject a capitalist life (at least an enlightened or modified capitalist life) to contribute to social justice. However, one should not

avoid working for social justice out of fear that it will risk one's comfortable lifestyle. It can be successfully done. Jon Katz

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 00:40