

Speaking ill of the Homeland, Comrade!

By Joseph L. Scarpaci

It was an eerie feeling walking through the streets of Havana last week as the Cuban evening news broadcast Cindy Sheehan's arrival on the island to denounce Camp X-ray, call for the closure of the U. S. Naval Base at Guantánamo, and criticize President Bush's foreign policy.

This was not the first time I had witnessed American news items blaring across Cuba's limited media outlets. The first instance was back in 1992 when a jury acquitted white LAPD police officers in the beating of Rodney King. The verdict triggered the infamous Los Angeles riots. Cuban press, TV, and radio characterized the incident as "America's Third World apartheid," and it was surely comforting to the island's majority black and mixed-blood residents to know that a similar travesty would not likely happen in Cuba.

Love him or hate him, admittedly Fidel Castro has done a lot to improve race relations during his 48-year rule.

All that has changed between the King and Sheehan broadcasts is that the black-and-white Soviet-built vacuum tube television sets of the early 1990s have been replaced by low-cost Chinese and South Korean color TVs.

However, the flickering of these images into the dark streets of Old Havana—all broadcasting in unison—underscore the ability of Americans to speak their minds anywhere in the world, and then be able to return to the Home of the Brave.

What a country!

A similar theme is underscored in the recent film, *Shut Up & Sing*, which documents the repercussions of Dixie Chicks lead singer, Natalie Maines' remarks made in London during a 2003 concert. She said that even though President George W. Bush was—like the Chicks—from the Lone Star State, the band supported neither him nor the war he was about to embark upon, with loyal Tony Blair at his side. The Londoners went wild.

The largest selling female North American band did pay a price for their freedom of expression. Federations of radio stations refused to play the band's songs. Seven seconds of impromptu, but heartfelt, opinions unleashed a McCarthy-like clamp down on their First Amendment rights.

Speaking ill of one's country while offshore evokes a flash of patriotism, disdain, and controversy. Cindy Sheehan has made a name for herself as an anti-war activist, the mother of a fallen soldier in Iraq, and now a "commie-loving peacenik." After much soul searching, Natalie Maines returned to the same London stage three years after her controversial statement. And you know what? She repeated the same remarks, and the London crowd went wild again!

Both Maines and Sheehan began speaking out against the war in Iraq and President Bush well before the opinion polls shadowed their sentiments. Such assertive Americans (especially “opinionated” women) who speak their minds in a public forum outside the country will invoke the ire of many Americans.

Would you speak out against your government outside the USA? That’s your call. But it is a call that no Cuban citizen can make without suffering dire consequences.

When Oswaldo Payá, the 2003 European Union Andrew Sakharov Prize winner for human rights, returned to Cuba after the awards ceremony, he was taunted by angry crowds. Dissidents who speak out against the Cuban government by giving interviews to the foreign press or meeting with U.S. consular personnel can face nasty “acts of repudiation” that are organized by pro-government groups.

Just ask the “Women of White” (*Mujeres de Blanco*) who peacefully and silently march outside a church each Sunday in a western Havana suburb. They protest the detention of their loved ones who have been imprisoned since 2003, all for the crime of meeting with U.S. consular officials.

There are no neat conclusions to be drawn from the way the Dixie Chicks, Cindy Sheehan, Oswaldo Payá, or the Women of White have been treated by their governments and compatriots. Intolerance crosses ideological and political boundaries. In the end, though, Cindy and Natalie continue with their lives, speak and travel freely, albeit with occasional death threats. That cannot be said of outspoken Cubans.

I have no doubt that the Dixie Chicks and Cindy Sheehan are as American and patriotic as apple pie. And Oswaldo Payá and the Women of White care deeply about their beloved Cuba, and the ideals so eloquently evoked by José Martí.

As media outlets in the new millennium instantly transfer messages around the globe, it is ever more obvious that not all news is treated equally. It will be interesting to see what news images flicker in the homes of Cubans the next time I walk through the evening streets, where people have been kept in the dark about the health status of their infirm leader.

The differences of liberty between the two nations are not small. We must continue to ensure the freedom of speech of Americans as we support the right of Cubans to freedom of speech as well.

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