

THE PRECIOUS RIGHT OF RESPONSIBLE DISSENT - Seattle Times, The (WA) - February 6, 1991 - page A10

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ANOTHER war. Another debate on the precious right of **dissent**.

It is a right that too often was trampled two decades ago, when the war in Vietnam divided our nation.

The hundreds of thousands who opposed that war were vilified as anti-American by the Nixon administration. Anti-war leaders were hounded by the Justice Department.

Now a strident anti-war voice from Seattle's past warns that the conflict in the Persian Gulf is threatening to recreate a climate against **dissent**.

It is a voice I heard often in the early '70s, when I was covering the anti-war movement.

Michael Lerner's was the wrong voice for the right cause - ending a war that was costing American lives and going nowhere.

In the '70s, it was a voice of revolution, not reason. It was a voice of confrontation that - intended or not - led to violence. It was not a voice of responsible **dissent**.

Lerner, who had been a student activist at the University of California, came to the University of Washington as a visiting assistant professor of philosophy. He was accused of using his classroom as an organizational ground for the Seattle Liberation Front, anti-war arm of the radical left.

After SLF confrontations on and off campus and clashes with police, there were demands that he be fired. Sen. James Andersen - now a state Supreme Court justice - said the taxpayers were "fed up to their ears" with paying Lerner to teach violence. Lerner's own Philosophy Department peers voted not to rehire him.

On Feb. 17, 1970, an SLF-led demonstration at the U.S.

Courthouse turned violent. Lerner and seven others were charged with conspiring to damage federal property. One fled. The remaining "Seattle Seven" were tried in the Tacoma court of U.S. Judge George H. Boldt in November of that year.

I covered that trial. Testimony revealed that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had bought the paint that was splattered on the federal courthouse during the demonstration. An FBI infiltrator of the SLF provided it.

The probability was strong that Lerner and the six other defendants would have been acquitted if

the trial had run its course.

The ``Seattle Seven" wouldn't let it.

They wanted to put the court on trial - constantly causing disruptions. They draped a swastika over Judge Boldt's bench and shouted: ``Heil Hitler!" They refused to return to court when ordered.

That caused a mistrial to be declared - followed by a mini-riot between some defendants and marshals.

The defendants served varying terms up to six months for contempt of court. Lerner spent 2 1/2 months at California's Terminal Island facility. The original charges never were refiled.

Lerner is now editor of Tikkun, a liberal bimonthly Jewish publication in Oakland. He has embarked on a campaign to right what he considers a long-standing injustice against him. He has written letters to university administrators, city officials, and newspaper editors to urge the UW to rehire him.

Fat chance. I would never lead that parade.

Lerner says his teaching career was destroyed because he opposed the war. That's historical revisionism. It was how he opposed it.

Lerner says he advocated confrontation, but never violence. He says he never conspired to break any laws - that he hardly knew the other defendants. One of those defendants, Roger Lippman, concurs in an article he recently wrote on the trial. ``As far as I could tell, none of the other defendants got along with him," he wrote of Lerner.

Lerner now calls Saddam Hussein a ``militaristic fascist." Lerner is not advocating immediate withdrawal of troops. He says war was not the best way to achieve a necessary end. He says there should be a cease-fire before major ground fighting begins.

The views of Lerner, now 48, have modified.

He says he would not embrace confrontation now. He says it was a mistake to consider people with differing views as intellectually and morally inferior. He says compassion must be shown to those with opposing views.

In short, there should be mutual respect for the convictions of those who oppose the Persian Gulf War as well as those who put up yellow ribbons to support the troops.

That advice might be Lerner's greatest classroom contribution to **dissent**.

Don Hannula's column appears Wednesday on The Times' editorial page.