

Views: Why Protesting the War Is a "Gay" Issue

A helicopter is swarming overhead, making a circle in the air roughly the area of Vienna's 1st District, the section of this city that holds its most famous palaces, monuments and museums.

As snowflakes float from the sky, I walk through one of the many arched walkways of Hofburg, the extravagant Imperial Palace of the Habsburgs, and head toward the Pestsau, or the Plague Monument, the center of the day's activity.

As I make my way through Vienna's sometimes maze-like alleys, I notice gaggles of Austrian police decked out in riot gear. They stand in small groups, smoking ciga-

Gay and lesbian people are specially suited to act as skeptics and critics of questionable government policies.

rettes, and, like everyone else — here in Austria and around the world — they are anxiously waiting.

In particular, the police are waiting for the day's anti-war protest to begin. But the real waiting game and the deeper anxiety for all of us comes from wondering just when American bombs might start exploding in Iraq.

The demonstration today is against that seemingly inevitable action. It's an international day of protest, with similar rallies being held in capitals across the world. Away from home, I want to somehow be a part of the voices calling for restraint against George Bush's single-minded vision for military action in Iraq, so I follow the crowds of demonstrators with hand-made cardboard



signs to Pestsau Square, the epicenter of the peace march.

Located on one of Vienna's most famous shopping streets, and just in the shadow of the majestic St. Stephan's Cathedral, the square is marked by a towering stone monument in its center. The Baroque carving of cherubs and saints was put in place in 1692 to celebrate the end of the black plague that had decimated Europe.

It's a fitting site for today's protest, as there seems to be a deadly bug being spread by the American government: The idea that war in Iraq is the world's only option.

Much of the world, including many Americans, doesn't believe it. In Vienna, I huddled with 15,000 people to raise our voices against George Bush's belligerent march towards war. In dozens of other cities, a combined millions of people did the same.

There are some in the gay and lesbian community who will object to this column, who will say that gay writers and thinkers shouldn't be espousing their opinions on the war in a community newspaper. These critics will argue that the war isn't a "gay issue."

I couldn't disagree more. On the contrary, I believe that particularly as gay and lesbian people, we are specially situated to act as skeptics and critics to questionable government policies and outright misinformation — especially when government policies could result in an unknown death toll. With all that we have collectively learned from our own history as gay and lesbian people, it would be a shame if we limited our critical thinking abilities and our questioning voices to a narrow range of topics.

In fact, rather than limiting our thoughts and discussions to a narrowly defined set of "gay issues," I believe we have a responsibility to expand our scope. We can't harp about our own human rights and ignore everyone else's — partic-

ularly when we are citizens of the most powerful country in the world. A country that is not shy about using its military might to wrestle what it wants in other parts of the world.

Now more than ever is when we need to exercise our skepticism publicly.

Despite the idealistic notion that we as Americans value individuality, the hard truth is that in our society — as in most societies — it's often very difficult and takes a lot of courage to voice unpopular opinions. It's particularly hard when it comes to questioning authority — especially if that authority is as powerful and forceful as the president of the United States.

Even worse, many people will call us "un-American" or "unpatriotic" for doing so.

During times of crises, it's understandable that most people have an automatic reflex to support their own government. For us as gay and lesbian people, there may be another powerful force pulling us to support the administration's move toward war: We all know what it's like to be outsiders. For many of us, being gay or lesbian has meant that we have been the ultimate outsiders from American society for much of our own lives. Now, especially in the light of so much European objection to America's handling of Iraq, there will be a natural tendency for many of us to want to "prove" our patriotism, to want to show other Americans we are "just as American" as they are, to band together as full-fledged team players, so that we can finally "belong" in a way that we might not always get to do.

But as gay and lesbian people, I believe we have a special place in public discourse, and I think part of that includes a special responsibility to be willing to ask tough, unpopular questions, to exhibit unapologetic skepticism, and to take up a broad band of human rights issues that may not narrowly relate to the single topic of how we have sex.

And even as I stand in a foreign country to make my voice heard through this protest, I can't imagine what could be more American. ▼

Mubarak Dahir receives e-mail at MubarakDah@aol.com

Good legal advice can make all the difference.



Langrock Sperry & Wool offers the services of 22 lawyers with over 300 years combined experience in all areas of the law — including two lesbian attorneys with special expertise serving the legal needs of the g/l/b/t/q community.

SUSAN MURRAY & BETH ROBINSON

With offices in Middlebury and Burlington

Middlebury (802) 388-6356

Burlington (802) 864-0217

smurray@langrock.com brobinson@langrock.com

Langrock Sperry & Wool, LLP

ATTORNEYS AT LAW



Nancy Ellen Brownsword, MA
Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor
COUNSELING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

802.862.0836

168 BATTERY STREET, BURLINGTON VT 05401

TEENS | ADULTS | INDIVIDUALS | COUPLES

RENT-A-GUY

- carpentry
- home improvement
- decks
- plumbing
- property maintenance
- scuba diving

Calls bill at 862-3537 or e-mail me at billsboat@adelphia.net, fully insured



Joseph Kress, M.A.

Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor
Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor

Individual and Couples Counseling
Adults and Adolescents

802-334-6301

95 Main Street, Suite 203, Newport, VT



OUR DIAMONDS

are Conflict-Free. Our policy is to provide stones that have not funded human rights abuses or terrorism.

GRANNIS GALLERY

Fine Gold

Church St. & Bank • 660-2032 • M-Th & Sat 10-6 • Fri 10-8 • OPEN SUNDAY 12-5