

Former law dean's words still relevant today

Editor's note: This article is a special submission to the law school edition of the Emerald and therefore is longer than the standard 550-word limit for guest commentaries.

Long before the news media began to react to what some now bluntly call lies of the Bush administration, the voice of a former University School of Law dean was resurrected to speak defiance once again, a quarter century after his death.

Words of Oregon Senator Wayne Morse — the nation's youngest law dean when he took the Oregon post at 30 in 1931 — have been evoked for the past two years by those concerned with loss of civil liberties in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001.

A parallel seemed clear to them because of the notoriety — then fame — Morse gained by speaking out against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in another time of patriotic fervor, 1964.

That courageous action — viewed by many as unpatriotic — objected to an illegal resolution of President Lyndon Johnson that turned Vietnam into a full-scale war. Much of what Morse said then echoes uncomfortably in the ears of today's Democrat legislators who have been co-opted from being the "loyal opposition" by a need to be seen as patriotic. In the attack on Iraq, all but a few accepted the government's global edict: "You are either for us or against us."

In 24 years as United States senator (as a Republican, then an Independent, then a Democrat), the former University Law dean was the consistent — often the only — voice of dissent against government malfeasance. His ringing words were heard once again last spring in a one-man play based on words from Morse's fiery mouth. The play, by University graduate and Portland resident Charles Deemer, was staged at the Morse Ranch, now within the Eugene city limits on Crest Boulevard.

Deemer used Morse's words that retain a lively relevance as, decades later, they seem to perfectly fit some issues plaguing the nation today. Here is a sampling from the play "An American Gadfly":

The party system discouraged Morse. "You don't have two parties in this country. You've got a coalition of reactionary Republicans and reactionary Democrats who are running American politics, irrespective of what party label they wear."

In his independent mode Morse felt like a political outcast, a status that suited him.

"The Republicans disown me. The Democrats have nothing to offer me. I'll bring my own chair to the Senate and sit in the aisle. I'm not sure which political convention I'll go to. Maybe I'll have my own. I could hold it in a phone booth. I reserve the right to be independent, no matter what party I'm affiliated with."

The environment and access to information were issues in Morse's time. "The president sided with economic

pirates to begin a systematic and complete giveaway of this country's valuable natural resources, and the Republican press was conducting a virtual news blockade against letting the American people know what was going on. They will try to make monsters out of those who try to prevent this giveaway program of the people's treasure. Our patriotism will be attacked."

In 1955, the safety of Formosa was at stake, and tiny islands of Matsu and Quemoy, just off the Chinese mainland, were the pawns.

"So who is the real aggressor and the real threat to peace? Who is behaving like an international bandit? We have no business making these unilateral resolutions when we should be taking the entire dilemma to the United Nations."

Morse saw merit in fighting for losing causes.

"Great good can be accomplished by entering fights and espousing policies even though they, at the moment, will be unsuccessful. It wakes people up. It makes them think. Our great cancer is that politicians don't enter fights, and don't battle for policies unless they believe they can win."

He challenged President Johnson about psychological habituation to war.

"Mr. President, the article discusses the techniques employed by the government to reduce opposition to the war in Vietnam."

Why there is so much anti-U.S. feeling in the world.

"Are we surprised at all the criticism begin shot at us from all around the

world? Does it really come as any surprise that we are becoming the most feared country in the world? I don't care if people don't want to hear this. It's the truth!"

There is a way to win the peace. "Peace can be won and maintained only if we convince freedom-loving people elsewhere in the world that the rule of reason, procedures of international justice, and the relinquishment of selfish interests are essential. These must be substituted in the thinking of people everywhere in place of emotional nationalism that still dominates the world."

Wayne Morse left the Senate when defeated at the polls by Robert Packwood, whose legislative legacy was in strong contrast to his predecessor's. Morse was campaigning to regain his seat when he died at 73 in 1974. His words testify to his unselfish commitment to justice and public service. His most fitting eulogy was spoken centuries before him by an independent man of courage:

"I am that gadfly which the gods have attached to the State. You think you might easily strike me dead. Then you would sleep on for the remainder of your lives, unless the gods in their care of you sent you another gadfly."

That was Socrates in his own defense — a voice, like that of his 20th century incarnation, Wayne Morse, the former University Law dean so sorely missed in public life today.

George Beres, a former University sports information director, lives in Eugene.

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