Suggested headline:

*Dissent is just as American as the flag*

We are old now, those of us who came of age amidst the turbulence of the Sixties and Seventies.

I spent those years at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, which was known at the time for its top-tier journalism school. Following the escalation of the Vietnam War into Cambodia, and after National Guard troops fired live ammunition and killed student protesters at Kent State University in Ohio, campuses across America exploded with protest, sometimes violently. As a fledgling journalist, much to my parents’ dismay, I made sure to get right in the middle of the mess.

At Southern, a couple thousand National Guard troops were called in, along with caravans of police officers from throughout the region. Times were tense and, wisely, university authorities closed the campus after a few days of unrest and sent everybody home.

I learned several things back then. One, students barely out of adolescence are awfully convinced they know everything. Two, they don’t do nuance. They’re still young enough to believe we live in a black and white world with simple choices.

Three, those in power do not take kindly to being resisted. At Southern, and most campuses for that matter, students were loud, obnoxious and disrespectful, but mostly non-violent. Didn’t matter. Those giving orders wanted the demonstrations stopped and were not very discriminating between relatively orderly protesters and troublemakers looking for confrontation. A lot of people who didn’t deserve it got whacked with riot sticks.

I’ve always thought that what I saw was the pointy end of our country’s deepest divisions. Recently, I read an article that confirmed it for me. The article reported on polling from that period. Americans overwhelmingly supported the Vietnam War. Strong majorities wanted protests ended, and thought the government should use force as necessary. Most Americans stood firmly with President Nixon, who condemned the dissent and vowed to restore law and order.

Those majorities held, until they didn’t. It became inescapable that the government had been lying about Vietnam. Public opinion turned sour. Nixon had been shown to be a criminal, chased out of office by the people and his peers, including patriots within his own party.

Protests played a key role in all that, and more. Without dissent and demonstrations, one wonders if the civil rights movement could have succeeded and opened opportunities for minorities. And if women would have achieved the rights to compete fully with men for economic equality. Change never comes easy when it runs against the established social grain.

My late father, a wonderful man whose memory fills me with awe, more than once said he believed my generation broke the world. There’s some truth in that. The days of “a man’s world,” and when people were supposed to know their place, passed forever into history. As a journalist, I didn’t make history, but spent years reporting how it unfolded. In fact, I’ve always enjoyed a tale Dad told me. He was at the local cafe with his farmer buddies. They were riled up, that day, about the press picking on Nixon. One said to Dad, “They ought to line those reporters up against a wall and shoot them all, don’t you think?” To which Dad replied, “Well, maybe, until my boy became one of them.”

There will be no apologies from me, ever, for the kind of journalism that holds bad leaders accountable.

So now I joke with my kids and grandkids, and tell them it’s their job to put the world right again in a fairer and more inclusive way.

And I let them know there’s nothing unpatriotic or un-American with that concept, when its purpose — like the Constitution’s Preamble states — is to “create a more perfect union.” A job that’s never done.

I’m reminded of my youthful experiences by the turmoil at various campuses over the war between Israel and Hamas. Calls for hardline crackdowns against protesters are getting louder. There have been demands to send in troops, fire college administrators, and so on.

Full disclosure, I’m on Israel’s side. With qualifications. Hamas terrorists committed murder, rape, kidnapping and more last October. Of course Israel responded with crushing force. Meanwhile, the terrorists hid behind women and children. At the same time, Israel’s slaughter of civilians by the tens of thousands is indefensible. Two things can be true at once.

America is pre-positioned to side with Israel. That fits our national narrative as a country with strong Judeo-Christian underpinnings. But just as “My country right or wrong” did not resonate in the Sixties and Seventies, neither does “Israel right or wrong” today.

Most of all, for this old guy steeped in journalism and the tumult of my youthful years, Americans should never lose sight of the First Amendment and the Founders’ incredible grace and wisdom. Read the text of the First Amendment. Freedom to assemble and seek redress of grievances is a bedrock principle of our existence. Left, right or off in some other camp of fringe idiocy, you get to say it. If it’s peaceful, it’s legal. Even if it offends a strong majority of the people. If it’s violent or excessively disruptive to the peace, it’s a crime. Not hard to understand the difference, if one is willing. Hard to practice with forbearance? Oh, yes.

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