

Published on Thursday, May 4, 2006 by the [San Francisco Chronicle](#)

Where Are All the Leaders of Faith?

by Helen Thomas

Where are the activist priests and ministers who took strong stands during the Vietnam War and hit the streets with their protests?

Three years into the war against Iraq, the silence of the clergy is deafening, despite U.S. abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and a reported American policy of shipping detainees to secret prisons abroad where, presumably, they can be tortured.

There are U.S. chaplains of many faiths serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, ministering to the men and women in uniform and reaching out to local religious leaders in both countries.

But here at home, the clergy seems to be in the same boat as the news media and most members of Congress: they are victims of the post-Sept. 11 syndrome that equates any criticism of U.S. policy with lack of patriotism.

The clergy are not alone. There is a disquieting public acceptance of the status quo. Although the Iraq war has a role in President Bush's declining standing in public opinion polls, rising gas prices may be having a bigger impact on his popularity.

During the Vietnam War, the clergy were vocal leaders of the peace movement and they picked up and marched.

I was reminded of that bygone era -- a time when everyone got involved -- with the passing last month of Rev. William Sloane Coffin, a Presbyterian minister who served as chaplain at Yale University and pastor at Riverside Church in New York.

He was a follower of civil rights leader, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and a liberal, to put it mildly.

Coffin went on the dangerous Freedom rides in the South in the 1960s and worked for human rights of African Americans. He became famous for his protests against the Vietnam War and later espoused the causes of gay rights and anti-nuclear proliferation. He hailed from a wealthy family, attended Ivy League schools, and served in World War II. Before attending a theological seminary, he worked for the CIA.

But he will be most remembered for his moral courage.

The Nation magazine -- which counted Coffin as a contributor -- quoted Coffin as saying he had the "sense of fulfillment from being in the right fight."

Writer and artist Robert Shetterly, Coffin's good friend, wrote on CommonDreams.org [a eulogy of Coffin](#) based on his long association with the minister, dating back to an anti-Vietnam War rally at Yale in 1968.

He recalled that Coffin had written in his latest book "Credo," a 2004 collection of his writings, that "the war against Iraq is as disastrous as it is unnecessary; perhaps in terms of its wisdom, purpose and motives, the worst war in American history. Our military men and women were not called to defend America, but rather to attack Iraq. They were not called to die for America, but rather to kill for their country. What more unpatriotic thing could we have asked of our sons and daughters?"

Shetterly's perception of Coffin was that he was not self-righteous and that he had doubts about his own convictions at times. He also wrote that Coffin made mistakes but learned from them.

Shetterly said Coffin "spent his life trying to atone for having followed military orders in 1945, putting 3,000 white Russians who fought against the Stalin communist regime, on a train from Germany to Moscow "and sure execution."

Some of Coffin's quotes are memorable.

After Sept. 11, he said the U.S. government should have vowed "to see justice done, but by force of law only, not by the law of force." He also said that "the world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love."

Lest I have selected Coffin's only intellectual qualities, Shetterly also describes his human side and said that he liked "a good drink. A good joke. A good song. A moral act. A worthy laugh."

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