

King George's war on terror

By William C. Kashatus

Earlier this year, I received an essay from one of my community college students drawing parallels between the Continental Army and al-Qaeda. It argued that both used terrorist tactics to free themselves from an oppressive foreign intruder.

"The United States has a moral obligation to pull out of Iraq and Afghanistan," the student concluded, "because our military isn't wanted or needed in either country."

I encourage my students to make connections between current and past events and think about the lessons of history. But what should an educator do when that produces a conclusion that strikes him as utterly wrong?

While there are occasions when I reveal my opinions to students, I generally steer a middle course by playing devil's advocate in class discussions and grading essays on their persuasiveness. I believe my primary responsibility is to help students develop their critical thinking and writing skills.

I'm heartened when students develop their own ideas,

whether I agree or not. In fact, some of the best essays I've received took positions with which I strongly disagree. But there was something especially unsettling about comparing the Continental Army to a terrorist organization.

Such comparisons of the American Revolution and the war on terrorism have become popular among my students, some of whom may be hoping to score points for creativity or shock value. The usual argument is that the guerrilla tactics of George Washington's army — hit-and-run attacks, the surprise slaughter at Trenton, the vigilantism of South Carolina patriot Francis Marion — were an 18th-century version of terrorism. Like al-Qaeda, the backwoods militiamen of the Continental Army resorted to such tactics because they faced a superior British force.

Comparisons are also made between the British, who imposed monarchy on the colonists, and Americans, who are now "forcing" democracy on Iraqis and Afghans. As such, today's terrorists and the 18th century's colonists share a common identity as "freedom fight-

ers"; we celebrate the Founding Fathers only because history is written by the victors.

Of course, Washington and his forces were attacking military targets in a war, not detonating explosives at a mosque or wedding reception to kill innocent civilians. And these simplistic comparisons don't note that there's a difference between a democratic ideology that was widely embraced by the colonists and the jihadist beliefs of a radical Islamic minority; that human life was respected by the Founding Fathers much more than it is by the Taliban; and that most Iraqis and Afghans welcome the U.S. military's presence because they, like the American patriots, embrace a right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

So why was this particular essay so troubling to me? Because it was written by an Army reservist who's done two tours in Iraq. And whom should we listen to if not those who have put themselves on the front lines of battle?

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