



With open discussion, no protests necessary

Why fear ideas?" Rich Oppel asked a good question in reporting on the speech he heard Henry Kissinger deliver in Boston during a "thoughtful discussion of whether to conduct foreign policy on human rights or realpolitik, politics based on practical and material factors rather than theoretical or ethical reasons."

The title of his column, "No need to fear ideas," gives an equally good answer. But is Oppel right in claiming that those who planned to disrupt a similar speech by Kissinger on Feb. 1 at the LBJ Library did so simply because Kissinger is an exponent of realpolitik?

The Kissinger speech in Boston was delivered at the International Press Institute's World Congress. The congress afforded the opportunity for a lively debate. Kissinger's critics, including the former European Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs and the former governor of Hong Kong, were able to express strong pro-humanitarian views in response to those put forward by Kissinger.

This is just what was missing from the planned Austin speech: a structure for the respectful

exchange of opinions by the "smart advocates on each side of the human rights vs. realpolitik debate."

For the Austin speech, the distribution of tickets was tightly controlled; questions to the speaker were screened in advance; and no one was scheduled to present alternative viewpoints, either on stage with Kissinger or afterward, according to the State-of-the-Union-speech model.



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It is this failure that members of the UT Austin Faculty Council, including myself, deplored in meeting with our own President Faulkner in February. It is lamentable that nothing has been done by the University to guarantee that the kind of forum Oppel so

much admired in Boston becomes the norm at UT.

Without such a guarantee, those whose strongly held views are effectively marginalized will necessarily resort to the kinds of tactics associated with movements in the 20th century that asserted rights for workers, women and minorities, that spoke strongly against the Vietnam War and that speak strongly now on volatile issues such as abortion and the World Trade Organization.

It is easy to use images of WTO protesters in Seattle

to sensationalize the issue. But such images cut both ways: Pictures of dead fetuses and murdered doctors and nurses don't add up to the kind of civilized debate we need to resolve our crucial disagreements as a united people.

I have heard it argued in lofty quarters that Kissinger has put in his service to the nation, deserves our respect and should be allowed now to say what he wants to say without having to answer questions about his past policy decisions.

Most of us would agree with most of this. We all witnessed the awful toll exacted of President Johnson as he aged two decades in one presidential term while grappling with the decisions that had to be made during the Vietnam War. Few of us are giant enough to shoulder such heavy responsibilities. But, as Harris Wofford, former deputy director of the Peace Corps, remarks about White House decisions during the 60s, "I've seen it in so many decision-making groups — the bright, the witty, the strong outtalk the wiser voices. . . . The brightest are not always the best, or they are not the wisest in many cases."

Oppel reports from Boston that Kissinger is still speaking out on how to conduct contemporary foreign policy. Therefore he must be willing to be engaged.

Others are.

On Feb. 16, Under Secretary of the Navy Jerry MacArthur Hultin came to Austin and held an open discussion with about 50 students from the war and violence seminars I teach in two of the College of Liberal Arts Honors programs. He took on all questions. High on the students' lists were the slow progress toward true equality for gays, women and people of color in the military and the morality of recruiting an all-volunteer army predominantly from the underprivileged segments of our society. Highest on his own list was the question of how long we could continue to practice Cold-War-style realpolitik "without damaging our viability as a force for world good." He argued at length that pursuit of a foreign military strategy consistent with human rights and American ideals is more in our interests than the past pragmatism of supporting despots.

We discussed such issues openly for 90 minutes. There was no need to fear ideas, no need for protests.

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