

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB SPEECH – Washington D.C

April 4, 2003

I had originally been asked here to talk about the war and our current political situation but I have instead chosen to hijack this opportunity and talk about baseball. Just kidding. Sort of.

I can't tell you how moved I have been at the overwhelming support I have received from newspapers throughout the country these past few days. I hold no illusions that all of these journalists agree with me on my views against the war. While the journalist's outrage at the cancellation of our appearance in Cooperstown is not about my views, it is about my right to express these views. I am extremely grateful that there are those of you out there still with a fierce belief in constitutionally guaranteed rights. We need you, the press, now more than ever. This is a crucial moment for all of us.

For all the ugliness and tragedy of 9-11 there was a brief period afterwards where I held a great hope. In the midst of the tears and shocked faces of New Yorkers, in the midst of the lethal air we breathed as we worked at Ground Zero, in the midst of my children's terror at being so close to this crime against humanity, in the midst of all of this I held onto a glimmer of hope in the naïve assumption that something good could come out of all this. I imagined our leaders seizing upon this moment of unity in America, this moment when no one wanted to talk about Democrat vs. Republican, white vs. black or any of the other ridiculous divisions that dominate our public discourse. I imagined our leaders going on television, telling the citizens that although we all want to be at Ground Zero we can't. But there is work that is needed to be done all over America. Our help is needed at community centers, to tutor children, to teach them to read, our work is needed at old age homes to visit the lonely and infirm, in gutted neighborhoods to rebuild housing and clean up parks, and convert abandoned lots into baseball fields. I imagined leadership that would take this incredible energy, this generosity of spirit, and create a new unity in America born out of the chaos and tragedy of 9-11. A

new unity that would send a message to terrorists everywhere: If you attack us we will become stronger, cleaner, better educated, more unified. You will strengthen our commitment to justice and democracy by your inhumane attacks on us. Like a phoenix out of the fire we will be re-born.

And then came the speech. "You are either with us or against us" And the bombing began. And the old paradigm was restored as our leader encouraged us to show our patriotism by shopping and by volunteering to join groups that would turn in their neighbor for any suspicious behavior.

In the 19 months since 9-11 we have seen our democracy compromised by fear and hatred. Basic inalienable rights, due process, the sanctity of the home have been quickly compromised in a climate of fear. A unified American public has grown bitterly divided and a world population that had profound sympathy and support for us has grown contemptuous and distrustful, viewing us as we once viewed the Soviet Union, as a rogue state.

This past weekend Susan and I and the three kids went to Florida for a family re-union of sorts. Amidst the alcohol and the dancing sugar rushing children there was, of course, talk of the war. The most frightening thing about the weekend was the amount of times we were thanked for speaking out against the war because that individual speaking thought it unsafe to do so in their own community in their own life. "Keep talking. I haven't been able to open my mouth."

A relative tells me that a history teacher tells his 11-year-old son, my nephew, that Susan Sarandon is endangering the troops by her opposition to the war. Another teacher in a different school asks our niece if we were coming to the school play. "They're not welcome here", said the molder of young minds. Another relative tells me of a school board decision to cancel a civics event that was proposing to have a moment of silence for those who have died in the war because the students were including dead Iraqi civilians in their silent prayer. A teacher in another nephew's school is fired for wearing a t-shirt with a peace sign on it. And a friend of the family tells of listening to the radio down south as the talk radio host calls for the murder of a prominent anti-war activist.

Death threats have appeared on other prominent peaceniks doorsteps for their views against the war. Relatives of ours have received threatening e-mails and phone calls. Susan and I have been listed as traitors, as supporters of Saddam, and various other epithets by the Aussie gossip rags masquerading as newspapers and by their electronic media cousins 19<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Apologies to Gore Vidal. Two weeks ago the United Way cancelled Susan's appearance at a conference on women's leadership and both of us last week were told that both we, and the First Amendment were not welcome at the Baseball Hall of Fame. A famous rock and roller called me last week to thank me for speaking out against the war only to go on to tell me that he could not speak because he fears repercussions from Clear Channel. "They promote our concert appearances", he said, "They own most of the stations that play our music. I can't come out against this war." And here in Washington Helen Thomas finds herself banished to the back of the room and uncalled on after asking Ari Fleisher whether our showing prisoners of war at Guantanamo Bay on television violated the Geneva Convention.

A chill wind is blowing in this nation. A message is being sent through the White House and its allies in talk radio and Clear Channel and Cooperstown. "If you oppose this administration there can and will be ramifications." Every day the airwaves are filled with warnings, veiled and unveiled threats, spewed invective and hatred directed at any voice of dissent. And the public, like so many relatives and friends that I saw this weekend, sit in mute opposition and in fear.

I'm sick of hearing about Hollywood being against the war. Hollywood's heavy hitters, the real power brokers and cover of the magazine stars have been largely silent on this issue. But Hollywood, the concept has always been a popular target.

I remember when the Columbine high school shootings happened President Clinton criticized Hollywood for contributing to this terrible tragedy. This as we were dropping bombs over Kosovo. Could the violent actions of our leaders contribute somewhat to the violent fantasies our teenagers are having? Or is it all just Hollywood and rock and roll? I remember reading at the time that one of the shooters had tried to enlist to fight the real war a week before he acted out his war

in real life at Columbine. I talked about this in the press at the time and curiously no one accused me of being unpatriotic for criticizing Clinton. In fact, the same talk radio patriots that call us traitors today engaged in daily personal attacks on their president during the war in Kosovo.

Today, prominent politicians who have decried violence in movies (the blame Hollywooders if you will), recently voted to give our current president the power to unleash real violence in our current war. They want us to stop the fictional violence but are OK with the real kind. And these same people who tolerate the real violence of war don't want to see the result of it on the nightly news. Unlike the rest of the world our news coverage of this war remains sanitized, without a glimpse of the blood and gore inflicted upon our soldiers or the women and children in Iraq. Violence as a concept, an abstraction. It's very strange. As we applaud the hard-edged realism of the opening battle scene of Saving Private Ryan we cringe at the thought of seeing the same on the nightly news. We are told it would be pornographic. We want no part of reality in real life. We demand that war be painstakingly realized on the screen but that war remain imagined and conceptualized in real life.

And in the midst of all this madness, where is the political opposition? Where have all the Democrats gone? Long time passing, long time ago? With apologies to Robert Byrd, I have to say it is pretty embarrassing to live in a country where a five foot one comedian has more guts than most politicians. We need leaders, not pragmatists who cower before the spin zones of former entertainment journalists. We need leaders who understand the Constitution, Congressmen who don't, in a moment of fear, abdicate their most important power, the right to declare war, to the executive branch. And please, can we stop the congressional sing a longs?

In this time when a citizenry applauds the liberation of a country as it lives in fear of it's own freedom, when an administration official releases an attack ad questioning the patriotism of a legless Vietnam veteran running for Congress, when people all over the country fear reprisal if they use their right to free speech, it is time to get angry. It is time to get fierce. It doesn't take much to shift the tide. My 11-year-old nephew mentioned earlier, a shy kid who never talks in class, stood up

to his history teacher who was questioning Susan's patriotism. "That's my aunt you're talking about. Stop it!" and the stunned teacher backtracked and began stammering compliments in embarrassment. Sports writers across the country reacted with such overwhelming fury at the Hall of Fame that the president of the Hall admitted he made a mistake and Major League Baseball disavowed any connection to the actions of the Hall's president. A bully can be stopped. So can a mob. It takes one person with the courage and a resolute voice. The journalists in this country can battle back those who would re-write our Constitution in the Patriot Act II or Patriot, the sequel, as we would call it in Hollywood. We are counting on you to star in that movie. Journalists can insist that they not be used as publicists by this administration. The next White House correspondent to be called on by Ari Fleischer should defer their question to the back of the room to the banished journalist du jour. Any instance of intimidation to free speech should be battled against. Any acquiescence to intimidation at this point will only lead to more intimidation. You have whether you like it or not an awesome responsibility and an awesome power. The fate of discourse, the health of this republic is in your hands, whether you write on the left or the right. This is your destiny. We lay the continuance of our democracy on your desks and count on your pens to be mightier. You've been born for this time and as the rules change millions are watching and waiting in mute frustration and hope. Hoping for you to defend the spirit and letter of our Constitution and to defy the intimidation that is visited upon you daily in the name of national security and warped notions of patriotism. Our ability to disagree, and our inherent right to question our leaders and criticize their actions define who we are. To allow those rights to be taken away out of fear, to punish people for their beliefs, to limit access in the news media to differing opinions is to acknowledge our democracy's defeat. These are challenging times. There is a wave of hate that seeks to divide us, right and left, pro-war and anti-war. In the name of my 11-year-old nephew and all the other unreported victims of this hostile and unproductive environment of fear, let us try to find our common ground. Let us celebrate this grand and glorious experiment that has survived for

227 years. To do so we must honor and fight vigilantly for the things that unite us.  
Like freedom, the first amendment and yes, baseball.