



Back Talk — Aphorisms, Patriotism, and Treating Others with Respect

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Aphorisms are the bane of living in another culture. Everyone around you understands what they mean, but you don't, and when you use aphorisms familiar to your own culture, your friends don't have a clue to what you are talking about.

This problem came to my mind when talking with an acquaintance about the soon to expire **USA Patriot Act** (of course **Patriot II** is in the wings and differing versions will be debated hotly this fall). I thought about using the phrase "let sleeping dogs lie" to suggest what I thought should be done. Yet, as I ran this through my mind, I wondered what was I trying to communicate if I used this old adage suggesting that it is better not to "stir up a problem that has lain quiet for some time" (<http://www.bartleby.com/59/3/letsleepingd.html>).

Was the **Act** in any way sleeping? Was I suggesting that this was a "dog" (e.g., poor, dumb, stupid) of an **Act**? Would my friend know that the meaning of the homonym "lie" to which I was referring was about lying about and not telling untruths? While there is some truth to this **Act** being a dumb response to a serious problem, I decided it would be better to simply say the US should let the **Act** die a natural death — whatever that means in politics.

Why, you might wonder, is **Tony** wasting time thinking about the **Patriot Act** anyway? Doesn't he have more important things to do? One year ago I wrote about the **Patriot Act** and our local Hong Kong version called **Article 23**, a proposed anti-sedition law which would have tried to seriously limit the publishing, acquisition of, and distribution of books questioning the authority of our government. I wrote about both of these issues partially to get them off my chest and so that I could move on to other more pressing issues. Yet three things have recently taken place to cause me to revisit the **Patriot Act** and the rights to publish and read all points of view:

First, I am about to attend my first **IFLA** meeting and I am a member of the **Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE)**. The work of **FAIFE** refers to the issues covered by both the **Patriot Act** and **Article 23**. As a member I subscribe to the **FAIFE** List (<http://infoserv.inist.fr>). Frequently this list seems to be the private domain of pro and anti **Castro** librarians/library users. The pro **Castro** forces use phrases like "brutal imperialist blockade" and "fallacies and lies spread about Cuba and its institutions" to characterize what they are up against. The opposi-

tion to the effects of **Castro's** rule is reminding everyone about how Cuban librarians have been put in prison for "daring to allow Cubans the freedom to read." The flaming back and forth between these two groups of true believers provides so many emails that I found myself adding the most frequent participants to my list of blocked email sources. I care about these issues but you can listen to the two points of view only so long before you want to tell them to duke it out by themselves (more American slang).

This email list produced a second reason for thinking more deeply about these issues. Some of the same people critical of **Castro** have turned their attention to China and its attempts to control bloggers, Websites, to filter email, and otherwise restrict Internet usage. Some of the responses to these criticisms have been angry and defensive noting that China is not one big jail and that its people do not have computer chips implanted to control what they think and do. Being a foreigner in China makes commenting a bit difficult but I noted on the **FAIFE** List that

- China is very open as long as you don't go to forbidden [Internet] sites or broadcast forbidden messages.
- It can be supposed that since the majority of people are not interested in politics, the majority of people in China are not bothered at all by the restrictions.
- China is becoming more democratic by leaps and bounds but the existence of lots of cadre/bureaucrats tied to the old ways of thinking slows things down.

My own view is that China is becoming a less and less restricted system all the time. Anyone visiting China realizes this. You meet all sorts of people quite willing to complain about everything and you are impressed with the abundance of Internet cafes and the infrastructure to allow millions of people to access the Internet. I am always struck with the thought that the armies of bureaucrats currently assigned to monitor the people's Internet activities have a totally up-hill battle before them and its one that they will lose — the question is not if they will eventually give up, or lose their funding, but when?

The third reason for thinking about questions revolving around the right-to-read question has arisen from local developments here in Hong Kong. Our Chief Executive (CE) is named by China. Local and ultimately Beijing disapproval with the performance with the last CE resulted in his withdrawal for health rea-

sons and the appointment of a career civil servant who was knighted by the British before they returned Hong Kong to China. Our new CE seems determined to not alienate Beijing and recently approved an executive order allowing covert surveillance without seeking the approval of the legislative unit in Hong Kong's political system. The distance between this sort of activity and demands for lists of reading material are not long. Perhaps recognizing that the rejected anti-sedition act cannot be accepted and enacted, the new CE is attempting to put the same provisions in place one piece at a time. This is a distressing development.

So what is the big deal? What has this got to do with librarians? I think it has to do with patriotism. For me, an ex-patriot American, the word patriotism is a short hand aphorism for all sorts of things: thoughts about Fourth of July Independence Day parades, hotdogs, singing the National Anthem before ball games, ice cream, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance with hand on heart in primary school, the Vietnam War, more hotdogs and ice cream, etc.

The pro and anti **Castro** librarians, the attempts to monitor/control Internet usage in China, and the attempts here in Hong Kong to limit intellectual freedoms can all seemingly require myself and other librarians to take a stand — to be patriotic or not. Most librarians I know want to be both. We don't want to have to choose to be one or the other. Yes, we recognize that there are books and Websites about how to construct bombs and death dealing micro organisms, and we wouldn't want to circulate them to bad people who would use this information to destroy others. But we don't want to be part of an enterprise that wants to restrict what people can or cannot read, nor do we want to share with the government a list of what some of our patrons have been reading. I think groups that want to force us to join one or the other camp are misguided. I think we need to hang out someplace in the middle (an aphorism) and stick to the basics: treat others as you would like to be treated and pick leaders who will follow that dictum. If we do that, we'll allow others basic freedoms and we'll avoid the political messes we read about daily. While this is a naive way of thinking, we must not give into those who think everyone else is evil and require our help in controlling them at all costs. Of course if everyone did this people would probably not need to write so many books and we'd be out of a job. 🍷