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Opinion

## Two stand-up guys for liberty

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By NAT HENTOFF

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Shortly after the horrendous crime of 9/11, I underlined the abuses of our constitutional liberties in the Patriot Act as it hurtled through Congress. During that steamrollered legislative process, I was briefly encouraged by a biting sardonic dissent from House Democrat David Obey of Wisconsin: "Why should we care? It's only the Constitution."

Someone did care and had the courage to say so publicly when others in Congress remained silent lest they be accused, during re-election campaigns, of being soft on terrorism. In the Senate, there was only a single vote against the Patriot Act, Democrat Russell Feingold, also of Wisconsin.

Obey and Feingold are both believers in the idea that dissent is patriotic. They have remained staunchly independent. Obey, now the third-most senior member of the House, is currently chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee, and characteristically, he is not automatically supporting President Obama's military buildup in Afghanistan.

When Commander In Chief Obama called Obey for his support, the Congressman asked the President whether he had seen the Bill Moyers PBS program on President Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War.

Johnson, despite his acute, gut-wrenching misgivings about further involvement in Vietnam, went along with his principal advisers, and subsequently failed to be re-elected.

There is no indication that President Obama experienced any gut-wrenching reaction to Obey's account of President Johnson's dilemma in continuing that war.

Nor is there any indication that Obey will stop thinking for himself. In Henry David Thoreau's phrase, Obey has been marching to his own drum for too many years to stop now.

In Michael Barone's invaluable "The Almanac of American Politics," we find that this politician "started his young adulthood as a Republican but was turned off by the anti-communism scare tactics of Sen. Joseph McCarthy." (That demagogue was also from Wisconsin.)

Even as he has moved to the top of the seniority ladder, Obey has retained his eagerness to fight for what he believes in. He doesn't kowtow to members of his own party. Shortly after Obama's election as president, Obey derisively deferred to him as 'crown prince.'"

If, as is quite possible, it becomes obvious that "Prince Obama" will have served only a single term, I can think of no one in either party I would more enthusiastically vote for as our next president than the man who says: "I didn't come here to be Richard Nixon's Congressman, Reagan's congressman, Obama's congressman. I'm here representing the Seventh District of Wisconsin."

During both the Bush-Cheney and now the Obama administration, I think more and more often of James Buchanan, a former Nobel Prize winner in Economics and a professor at Michigan's Hillsdale College ( where there are mandated courses on the Constitution, a rarity in our institutions of higher learning):

This patriot professor has said: "In a constitutional democracy, persons owe loyalty to the Constitution rather than Government."

As Abraham Lincoln said in 1858: "What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence? It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, our army and navy. ... Our reliance is the love of liberty. ... Destroy this spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism at your door."

I sure would like to vote for a president whose reaction to the Patriot Act — legislation which would have shocked Madison and Jefferson — was a sardonic rebuke to the herd mentality of Congress.

David Obey, a true patriot in action, stood apart from them.

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