

Patriot acts: Two giants for justice

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 15, 2003](#) issue

I was reading some of the many tributes to Palestinian activist and scholar Edward Said, who died on September 25, when a friend called from New York's Union Theological Seminary. He wanted to send me a new film documentary that features William Sloane Coffin Jr.—like Said, a giant in the struggle for justice. Edward Said died at age 67, after a decade-long battle with leukemia. Coffin is, thankfully, still with us at age 79.

The two men have worked in different settings and for different causes. But both combined scholarship and passion and in their own way fought for justice in an unjust world despite constant battering from those who wanted them silenced. Yes, I wanted to see the film, *A Lover's Quarrel with America* (www.olddogdocumentaries.com), and I want others to see it, as well as to get acquainted with the works of Edward Said (see www.edwardsaid.org). We ignore the work of these two giants for justice at our peril.

Said's first major academic work, *Orientalism* (1978), described how Western democracies were imperialistic in their attitude toward Arabs and Islam. Murad Othman wrote at the Web site www.GlobalComment.com that Said sought to expose "the inherent prejudice towards Arabs and Muslims in the writings and discourse of some of the West's leading writers and intellectuals. He argued that the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in novels and other published materials in Europe and the U.S. was intended to legitimize colonialism."

Coffin and Said were both based for a time in New York City, Said at Columbia University and Coffin as pastor at Riverside Church (1977–1987). Coffin, a major leader in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam-war movements and a chaplain at Yale University, was one of seven freedom riders arrested and convicted in Montgomery, Alabama, while protesting segregation laws. (The Supreme Court later overturned the conviction.)

It was as an in-your-face activist and eloquent orator that Coffin entered the national stage at the height of the antiwar movement in October 1967. In his new book, *They*

Marched into Sunlight, David Maraniss remembers Coffin as a leader of a delegation that included Benjamin Spock, Norman Mailer and “a flock of antiwar notables” who marched up to the steps of the Justice Department in Washington. Coffin delivered an “eloquent” speech before entering the building to deliver a bag filled with 994 draft cards collected from young men to protest the war in Vietnam. “We cannot shield them, we can only expose ourselves as they have done,” Coffin said of the young resisters.

A Justice Department official sought to defuse the protest and refused to accept the cards. Coffin denounced him for being “derelict in his duty for refusing to accept evidence.” Maraniss reports that Norman Mailer, the social historian on the scene, saw “a contained anger in Coffin, much like lawyer’s anger.” The protest was not defused; it received wide media coverage and infuriated Lyndon Johnson.

In a talk at Union and in an interview at his home in Vermont, both shown in *A Lover’s Quarrel with America*, Coffin spoke about U.S. self-awareness after 9/11. “We had the world’s good will and we have squandered it! I’m worried that we have a self-righteousness now that comes from feeling unfairly hurt. We could have expanded our horizons, widened our hearts, to understand that a lot of people in this world are being unfairly hurt. But we closed in on ourselves, and the most powerful nation in the world became the victim of victimhood.”

In his 2002 State of the Union address President Bush identified Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an “axis of evil.” Recalling St. Augustine’s admonition that one should “never fight evil as though it were something that arose totally outside of yourself,” Coffin insists that “a far more formidable trio of evil are environmental degradation, pandemic poverty and a world awash with weapons.” He suggests that “it would be very good American policy for the sake of our national security to wage war against global poverty.” If we did that seriously, “it would be very hard to recruit new terrorists.”

In his struggle for civil rights and peace, Coffin always has been ecumenical in spirit and pragmatic in purpose. As he puts it, “We have a major responsibility to be faithful to God. Faith is a matter of being faithful, and faithful Jews, faithful Muslims, faithful Christians have a lot in common, and together, we could actually save the world.”

Both Coffin and Said also criticize countries beyond the U.S. Said was an outspoken critic of the failure of Arab leadership in the modern world. In an article published before the Iraq war, he lamented Arab impotence: “The Arab governments—no, most of the Arab countries from top to bottom—sit back in their seats and just wait as America postures, lines up, threatens and ships out more soldiers and F-16’s to deliver the punch. The silence is deafening.”

Coffin and Said have been neither silent nor silenced. As Coffin puts it: “The true patriots are those who carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country as a reflection of God’s eternal lover’s quarrel with the entire world.”