

Captain May – September 24, 2003 – unpublished essay:

“Capt. James Yee, a new Capt. Alfred Dreyfus?”

A captain from a suspect religious group is arrested for espionage by his government, tried by a court martial declared secret for purposes of national security, convicted and sent into confinement and disgrace...

But after a dozen years the whole affair is revealed to have been a right-wing frame up to fan nationalist fanaticism. The military, the media and majority religious groups are revealed as having plotted in a frame-up. The captain's contrite country ends up acclaiming and decorating him, and promoting him major.

Will this be the history of Capt. James Yee, the American Moslem? I don't know, but it *is* the history of Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, the French Jew, and it happened a century ago.

So is the past prologue in the case of Capt. Yee? Again, I don't know, but as a former Army officer myself (alas, another mere captain), I'd like to examine the *possibility* that he is not receiving his fair due from the country he has served, both in war and peace, after his graduation from WestPoint.

I watched Fox News broadcast the breaking story Saturday afternoon, I was a bit taken aback that there were already two “experts” on hand to state that the government always had strong evidence before it made an arrest. That seems a bit suspect to me because Capt. Yee still has not been charged with anything at all, although Fox News mentioned “suspicions” of treason and espionage.

I have to admit a bit of skepticism about Fox News. In a recent interview, CNBC's Tina Brown asked CNN's Christiane Amanpour whether media had been intimidated by the White House into modifying its war coverage. Amanpour's answer was disturbing:

“I think the press was muzzled and I think the press self-muzzled. I'm sorry to say but certainly television and, perhaps, to a certain extent, my station was intimidated by the administration and its foot soldiers at Fox News. And it did, in fact, put a climate of fear and self-censorship, in my view, in terms of – of the kind of broadcast work we did.” [Topic A, Tina Brown, host, Sept. 10.]

I've kept the TV on Fox News since, and I've been a bit concerned by the announcements of the arrests of Capt. Yee and now Senior Airman Ahmad al-Halabi within a two-day period, when there were two *months* between their arrests. I'm a bit more concerned that Fox News is mentioning the possibility of a death penalty, because it smacks of intimidation. I'm even more concerned that talk radio is already beginning to talk of an Islamic Fifth Column in the United States.

We of the military and we of the media (and I've served both masters) are creating a strong climate of prejudice against American citizen service members who have yet to speak on their own behalf. Once you've fostered mistrust of the military, you're pretty close to declaring a loyalty crisis in America.

It all seems a bit like the kind of half-suggestive, half-coercive manipulation of public affairs and military justice that happened a century ago in France – and that Ms. Amanpour alluded to on CNBC two weeks ago.

Capt. Yee and any other alleged participants in espionage deserve to have fair, open hearings, free from the veil of secrecy that ominously surrounds affairs at Guantanamo Bay. If they do not, the rest of the world, who also skeptically doubt our motives, may think that Capt. Yee, Airman al-Halabi, and any others swept up in the investigators' net are victims of a political/military lynching intended to strengthen public paranoia, perhaps even launch a new McCarthyism.

A fair and open hearing is in order, and, if warranted, a fair and open trial, preferably in a civilian venue so as to remove any hint that a military kangaroo court rendered a political decision on White House orders. That's all this true soldier wants. I yield to no one in loyalty to my country and its Constitution, and if loyalty means talking about foreign fall-guys like Capt. Alfred Dreyfus or domestic tyrants like Senator Joseph McCarthy, so be it. As President Bush mentioned when he recently honored the 3rd Infantry Division, this is America, not Iraq, and here no one gets executed for speaking their mind. That's good to know. As long as we can discuss the prospect of oppressive government we need not fear it.

Capt. Eric May served as a military intelligence officer and public affairs officer on the General Staff of the Army's 75th Division. He was the editorial writer for NBC affiliate KPRC in Houston, Texas.