

Choices for Economists and Business Leaders:

To Speak or Not To Speak

by Marcel Arsenault

[Back to Previous Page](#)

As reported a few weeks ago by Carol Hymowitz, in the Wall Street Journal:

In the debate over the war with Iraq, where are the voices of U.S. business? 'There is a silence among business leaders that is deafening, and which is an exception to the rule of how executives behaved in the past,' says Richard Tedlow, a business historian at Harvard Business School and author of "Giants of Enterprise."

When General Electric Chairman and CEO Jeffrey R. Immelt was asked by French newspaper La Tribune what impact a war would have on GE, he said "I'm a businessman, not a politician. As an American, I stand behind my president, but otherwise it's beyond my expertise."

Reasons to Keep Quiet

As a businessman, I have openly voiced opposition to the current US war policy. An article in the Rocky Mountain News (complete with photos) quoted me, "We are in a very frail economy right now...a war with Iraq could cause our economy to be gut shot". The same article quoted a large defense contractor who "disagreed." Of the 1000 tenants in my various buildings, that defense contractor happened to be the largest. Word got back to me that they were mad as hell at my statements, and if they had other practical options they would leave my building. I still sweat bullets when I think of the consequences. I'm naturally outspoken, but as a businessman, it's hard to ignore the benefit of keeping your mouth shut.

Freedom of Speech for Some

Many ECAAR members and supporters signed the open letter in opposition to the Iraqi war. However, most endorsements came from economists safely protected in positions of academia, an environment where freedom of opinion has long been cherished. Relatively few signatures came from economists working for private industry where statements that offend clients can get you fired.

Similarly, I rather suspect that those "Giants of Enterprise" professor Tedlow was referring to were self-made, tough and crusty entrepreneurs who molded and controlled their business (Carnegie, Ford, Edison and their ilk). These were a different breed from the mandarin-politician required to manage the incredibly complicated enterprises founded by these giants.

Because I control 100 percent of the stock in my small enterprise, I enjoy rare freedom to say what I deem correct, regardless of the consequences. If the emperor has no clothes, I stand up in the crowd and exclaim it. I'm a contrarian and value the luxury of thinking very long term. My relative success has afforded me a unique pulpit: I can afford being buffeted by the breeze of popular opinion. By contrast, the president of GE, juggling the pressures of his board, shareholders, employees, states "the emperor looks wonderful" or "I'm just a businessman, the emperor's dress is beyond my expertise."

Those of us cloistered with our freedom of voice dream that we would have the courage to still declare objection to wrongheaded policy of our government-even if it cost our company a lucrative jet engine contract, or cost us our job. I suspect not.

As academic economists, or independent businessmen, we are protected from termination. Even in our unique protection there are centripetal forces compelling us to the center of popular opinion. We must struggle against these forces. We have the responsibility to sponsor and nurture unique voice. Our colleagues, citizens at large, and especially our government, need this voice, even if it pisses them off. History may prove that we were their best friends and the truest patriots.

Courage. Humanity is always better served by the force of unpopular ideas than the steel of the sword.

Marcel Arsenault is CEO of Colorado & Santa Fe. The family foundation of Marcel and Cynda Arsenault supports long term programs to put an end to war.

[Back to top](#)

Economists for Peace and Security
<http://www.epsusa.org>