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Opinion

COMMUNITY VIEW

Bush creating climate of intimidation

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I was going to the hardware store, driving from Purchase to Rye Brook. It was evening, just getting dark. I saw flares, police cars and backed-up traffic, and thought there had been an accident. I looked for a way around, but I couldn't see an easy one. Then it made sense — the flares and police cars marked a drunken-driving checkpoint, and they wanted everyone to come through.

Officers chatted for a moment with each driver, looked in with flashlights, and waved most cars on. The officer I spoke to was friendly, assured me that roads were not blocked, that I could come back this way, too.

I got the drywall screws and other hardware I needed and headed back. I stopped again, same checkpoint, opposite direction. The new officer asked where I was from.

"Purchase," I said, "though I just moved up from Florida." I still have Florida plates.

He went to look and came back around to my window.

"I should give you a ticket for that sticker," he said.

What sticker? Had my registration expired? Couldn't be. What then? I

looked confused.

"That sticker you got, 'Defend America, Defeat Bush.' I should give you a ticket for that."

He was shining his light in and looking at me, and I smiled weakly. What could I say? I did not want to be pulled over; I wanted to get home; he did not seem to be in a kidding mood.

He looked at me for another minute, then told me to go on.

Could he have given me a ticket? He might have found something — the fact that I still have Florida plates, though I live in New York, for example, or something. He could have put me through a battery of driving-under-the-influence tests and taken up my evening.

I know it's not wise to argue with law enforcement, and — fair enough — they have a tough job. But this was over political views. I was not suspicious. I was not trying to do anything. I was airing a political view, exercising my extremely American right to free speech, to express a view that the government is doing things that are not good for America.

And here's the thing. I think that officer felt free to say what he did, to use his power to scare me a little for opposing President Bush, to — let's face it — intimidate me (albeit mildly) for my po-

litical views, because of a climate that President Bush created. Disagreeing with Bush's policies is unpatriotic; not liking the way he fights terror is weak; being liberal or progressive is somehow an insult to the women and men who died on 9/11. And law enforcement should have a lot of discretion to identify, question, search and, if necessary, detain those who don't seem to be with the program. This is how Bush likes people to think.

But, in fact, dissent is patriotic; apathy and blind obedience are not. The war on terror could be fought more effectively than it's being fought by Bush in my view. The people who died on 9/11 deserve government that will protect the ones they left behind, not provoke worldwide anti-American sentiment, I think. And I think law enforcement needs to uphold the law and to take pride in protecting Americans when they exercise their right to express their opinions, especially their political opinions, freely and openly. That is America at its best.

So, like my sticker says: Defend America, defeat Bush.

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