

Brattleboro Reformer
Standing at the gate
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We think that the primary duty of any elected board is to listen to its constituents and to act upon the concerns of the people who put them into office. That's why we are disappointed that the Brattleboro Selectboard chose to keep off the town meeting warrant a petition article calling for the indictment and trial of former President George W. Bush for war crimes and for violating the U.S. Constitution.

We're not disappointed, nor surprised, that the board didn't support the intent of the article. We like a good symbolic gesture as much as the next person, but admittedly, Brattleboro's power to bring Bush to justice is somewhat limited.

However, we disagree with the statements of Selectboard member Jesse Corum that there's no proof that any of the offenses that Bush is accused of took place. They did occur, they are well-documented and they constitute serious breaches of both international law and our constitution. They merit an investigation.

As New York Times columnist Paul Krugman wrote on Jan. 16, "If we don't have an inquest into what happened during the Bush years ... this means that those who hold power are indeed above the law because they don't face any consequences if they abuse their power."

The Obama administration doesn't seem interested in staging such an inquest, out of fear of being seen as partisan and vindictive. That was the stated reason why the Clinton administration didn't pursue the foreign policy abuses of the Reagan-Bush years that culminated in the Iran-Contra affair in the 1980s. As a result, serious crimes were swept under the rug and Americans were denied the truth.

"It's true that a serious investigation of Bush-era abuses would make Washington an uncomfortable place, both for those who abused power and those who acted as their enablers or apologists," wrote Krugman. "And these people have a lot of friends. But the price of protecting their comfort would be high: If we whitewash the abuses of the past eight years, we'll guarantee that they will happen again."

Corum and the other members of the Selectboard are entitled to their opinions about Bush and whether the wording of the article was offensive and uncivil. Our main objection is that nearly 500 town residents signed a petition to bring this matter before Town Meeting representatives, and the board voted that petition down by a 4-1 margin.

Selectboard member Rich Garant, the only one who voted in favor, felt that if enough town residents sign a resolution, it is the board's duty to allow town meeting representatives to vote on it.

"Does this board feel it wants to be a gatekeeper for public sentiment?" he asked.

"We are the gatekeeper, whether we want to be or not," said board member Martha O'Connor.

That, in a nutshell, sums up the attitude of the current majority on the board. It is how they came up with a proposal for a trash disposal plan that, judging from the number of letters we've received, has little support. It shows a disdain for democracy and for the right of the people to bring matters before Town Meeting.

Would the Bush article, as Corum said, divert the town's attention away from real issues it needs to confront? We feel that it is not for the Selectboard to decide. If enough signatures are gathered to put an article on the warrant, it should be left to the Town Meeting representatives to make the determination of the validity of the petition. Five people should not trump the will of 500 people.