

A true patriot is defined by his actions

In 1961, a young African American man, after hearing President Kennedy's challenge to, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," gave up his student deferment, left college in Virginia and voluntarily joined the Marines.

In 1963, this man, having completed his two years of service in the Marines, volunteered again to become a Navy corpsman.

The man did so well in corpsman school that he was the valedictorian and became a cardiopulmonary technician. Not surprisingly, he was assigned to the Navy's premier medical facility, Bethesda Naval Hospital, as a member of the commander in chief's medical team, and helped care for President Johnson after his 1966 surgery. For his service on the team, which he left in 1967, the White House awarded him three letters of commendation.

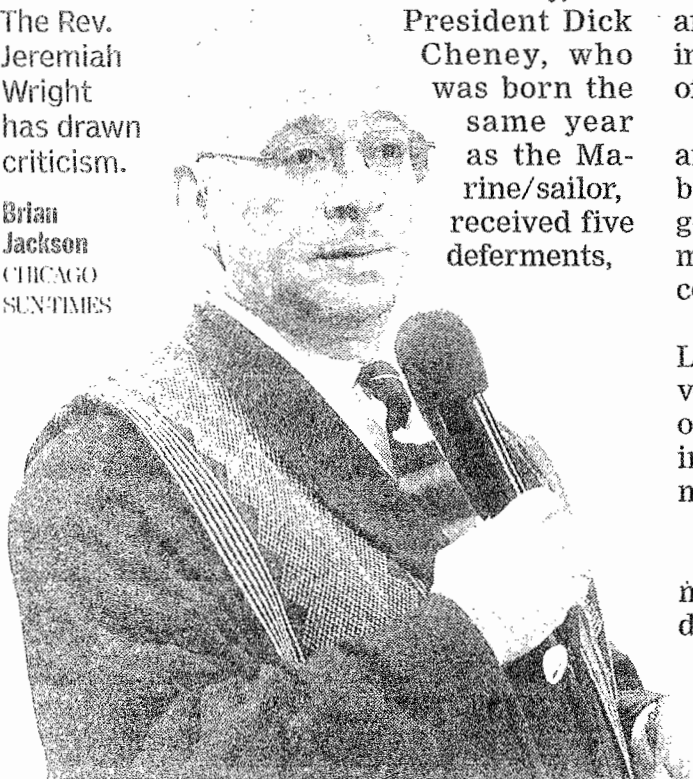
What is even more remarkable is that this man entered the Marines and Navy not many years after the two branches began to become integrated.

While this young man was serving six years

on active duty, Vice President Dick Cheney, who was born the same year as the Marine/sailor, received five deferments,

The Rev. Jeremiah Wright has drawn criticism.

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four for being an undergraduate and graduate student and one for being a prospective father. Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush, both five years younger than the African American youth, used their student deferments to stay in college until 1968. Both then avoided going on active duty through family connections.

Who is the real patriot? The young man who interrupted his studies to serve his country for six years or our three political leaders who beat the system? Are the patriots the people who actually sacrifice something or those who merely talk about their love of the country?

After leaving the service of his country, the young African American finished college, entered the seminary, was ordained as a minister and eventually became pastor of a large church in one of America's biggest cities.

This man is the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the retiring pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ, who has been in the news for comments he made over the last three decades.

Since these comments became public, we have heard criticisms, condemnations, denunciations and rejections of his comments and him. We've seen on television, in a seemingly endless loop, sound bites of a select few of Wright's many sermons.

Some of Wright's comments are inexcusable and inappropriate and should be condemned, but in calling him "unpatriotic," let us not forget that this is a man who gave up six of the most productive years of his life to serve his country.

How many of Wright's detractors, Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly to name but a few, volunteered for service, and did so under the often tumultuous circumstances of a newly integrated armed forces and a society in the midst of a civil rights struggle? Not many.

While words do count, so do actions.

Let us not forget that, for whatever Wright may have said over the past 30 years, he has demonstrated his patriotism.

Korb and Moss are, respectively, Navy and Marine Corps veterans. Korb served as assistant secretary of Defense in the Reagan administration.

This column first ran in the Chicago Tribune.

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