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### **“Room for Debate”**

By Thomas J. Raleigh

Those who have reservations about the way the United States is conducting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the global fight to destroy terrorist networks ought not be reluctant to voice informed opinions. Such alternative views and criticisms will neither undermine coalition efforts nor embolden those who oppose us.

A renewed, substantive and constructive debate on war aims and methods will - in the long run - serve to stiffen U.S. resolve in what most everyone recognizes will be a decades-long struggle by widening "ownership" of these wars. Such debate will strengthen America, not weaken it.

What might constitute such a renewed debate? What might be some common terms of reference?

What follows is a proposal for some rules of the road.

#### **If one supports the war, one ought to:**

- Concede that the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and of evidence that Saddam Hussein's regime was connected to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, have hurt U.S. credibility and that this will present an obstacle as the United States tries to maintain and expand a global coalition to fight terrorist networks.
- Acknowledge that the level of sectarian violence in Iraq is approaching that of civil war - if it has not already passed that threshold.
- Recognize that the United States is bearing a disproportionate burden of operations in Iraq and in Afghanistan; that in the face of a tenuous and shrinking coalition, force exhaustion is a very real concern - one that is affecting morale, retention, recruiting and the readiness of our armed forces.
- Acknowledge that coalition forces in Iraq face a sophisticated threat from al-Qaida terrorists, Baathist/Sunni insurgents, Iranian agent provocateurs and associated jihadists.
- Allow that such a threat demands a sophisticated and multidimensional response, one that might not require the defeat of all enemies exclusively on the field of battle.
- Avoid incendiary comments that state or imply the war in Iraq or the war on terrorism is between Christianity and Islam. Recognize that such remarks will only serve to disillusion moderate Muslims and provide recruiting fodder for terrorists.

**If one opposes the war, one ought to:**

- Accept the assertion that there are some very bad guys out there who are well-organized and well-financed, immune to reason and utterly uninterested in negotiation, whose only purpose in life is to kill Americans - and that those in our government to whom we entrust our safety and security must take steps to eliminate, capture and neutralize them.
- Ensure that criticisms are reasonable, focused and directed toward U.S. policy, and not simply gratuitous, *ad hominem* attacks on the president or his cabinet.
- Recognize that both the executive branch and Congress share responsibility for the conduct of the war or wars.
- Avoid excessive hand-wringing and second-guessing. Focus on where we are, where we want to go, what we want to achieve - and how best to get there.
- Accept the assertion that much of the good news of what is happening in Iraq and Afghanistan goes unreported, as do the successes of most covert operations.

**Regardless of one's position on the war, one ought to:**

- Consider posturing and other use of the war for partisan or personal political advantage as unconscionable and inexcusable.
- Reflect on the observation attributed to 5th century B.C. Greek dramatist Aeschylus, "In war, truth is the first casualty" and allow that a certain degree of skepticism might not be a bad thing.
- Consider it an obligation to be well-informed. Consider worthy for discussion the role, effectiveness and orchestration of all the elements of national power in efforts to neutralize terrorists and dismantle the networks that support them.
- Also consider worthy for discussion the role of covert operations in the fight against terrorism; under what conditions and under whose authority such operations will be conducted; the ethical considerations of extra-judicial assassination and other such activities; and whether such operations, which demand the utmost secrecy, are even possible in an open and transparent society such as ours.
- Consider, too, under what circumstances the pre-emptive and/or unilateral use of military force might be justified, necessary or required.
- Consider as worthy of discussion how the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan relate (or do not relate) to the global war on terrorism; how they contribute (or do not contribute) to regional stability and/or the democratization of the Middle East. And consider under what condition we can begin to draw down U.S. troop levels in Iraq.

Finally, regardless of one's opinion on the war, however that might change or evolve, one ought to pray every day for the safety of our men and women serving in our armed forces.

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Note: This article was also published in the Dallas Morning News, the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, and the Buenos Aires Herald