

San Francisco Chronicle

Friday, December 23, 2005

'War' on Christmas an excess of rhetoric in a time of real war

- Thomas J. Raleigh

We have been hearing the reports every day, for weeks, from the front -- not from Afghanistan or Iraq, but from across the United States, where supposedly a "war on Christmas" is raging.

As in years past, Christmas tress, mangers and menorahs have increasingly become the focus of a simmering debate regarding the establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution, punctuated by a rancorous popular chant about taking "Christ out of Christmas."

This year brought a new dimension to the controversy, when a chain of stores attempted to achieve religious neutrality by deciding to greet shoppers with "Happy Holidays" rather than "Merry Christmas." Some found such attempts not to offend to be -- well -- offensive, and have responded with populist calls to shop only in "Christmas-friendly" stores.

I can imagine that many listen to the debate with a certain bemused detachment, saying to themselves, "Jeeziz H. Christopher Robin! Is this all some people have to worry about? Are we not in the middle of a real war -- one that is protracted, complex, costly and bloody?"

Count me among those who find nothing troubling about having a Christmas tree in Rockefeller Plaza or at the White House; who believe that such displays are not unconstitutional; who feel that mayors and city councils can best make decisions regarding holiday displays in their communities; who are dismayed by the frivolous lawsuits filed by the ACLU on behalf of atheists who object to such displays; and who are not offended should they be greeted this time of year with "Happy Holidays." Heck, I'd be happy with "Hi."

What is nevertheless troubling is the increasingly gratuitous politicization of Christmas by those who maintain that ominous forces seek to secularize this nation. It has become a holiday tradition for the punditry-political complex to perpetuate this semi-contrived controversy, along with the circular debating it engenders, to boost both ratings and political fundraising. They tell us that the war on Christmas is yet another critical battle in the "culture wars."

This leads to something that is more disturbing still: the use, misuse and abuse of the word "war" -- something that didn't start just recently.

For sure, both the ideological left and right have, with equal enthusiasm, been waging rhetorical war to mobilize public opinion on topics, serious and silly, for decades: the war on poverty (Johnson's); drugs (Reagan's); the moral equivalent of war (Carter's); and, more recently, the wars on the press, porn, and science (all supposedly George W. Bush's), AIDS, cancer, academic freedom, dissent, journalism (supposedly Rupert Murdoch's), women, waste (Donald Rumsfeld's), the Bill of Rights, judicial activism, copying (and intellectual property, including the war on game pirates), spam (and splogs and file sharing), medical marijuana, fat and -- the mother of all rhetorical wars -- the culture wars.

But to suggest a war on Christmas is to scale the Himalayas of hyperbole. To put the words "war" and "Christmas" together for rhetorical effect, for the sake of a sound bite, is more than just trite, it is at once absurd and inappropriate. To do so -- particularly during a time of war -- demeans the gravity of war itself. War is nothing less than a scourge, best undertaken only as a last and unavoidable resort; and regardless how necessary or noble, war is death and destruction, maiming and suffering; and it leaves physical, mental and emotional scars, even among those who emerge victorious. Because of this, war as an endeavor -- or as a word -- should never be taken lightly.

If these observations seem reasonable, so might the following two suggestions.

First, that politicians, speechwriters, journalists and commentators avoid evoking "war" unless it is war they are addressing. Wordsmithing warriors (most of whom have never spent a day in uniform, let alone a day in combat) ought to resist the temptation to cloak their cause in martial terms. However important it might be, it falls short of the high stakes, desperate struggles and daily hardships one can only associate with real war. The pen can indeed be mightier than the sword, but to blithely co-opt war is to trivialize it.

Second, let the only link we make this season between Christmas and war -- the "real war" -- be along these lines: to hope, or perhaps pray, that our servicemen and women, serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, have one night without the earthshaking concussion of a suicide bomber; one night without the crack of a sniper's bullet; one night without even a distant thud of an errant mortar round. In short, that those whom we sent to far-away lands, on a perilous mission, may have one silent night.

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