

Engaging our minds before we engage our ground troops

By THOMAS G. PALAIMA

As the national debate over American involvement in NATO military operations in the northern Balkans intensifies, we must remind ourselves again and again of the real human consequences of the decisions we ask our political and military leaders to make. We naturally seek the comfort of abstractions, and it is easier to speak about general humanitarian goals or strategic objectives than to talk straight about hard choices and grim realities. We must avoid such "ostrichism" at all costs.

It is no accident that discussion about the protracted air campaign heats up every time we can focus on a specific incident that makes clear what is at stake in Kosovo for us and for the Albanians and Serbs: the capture of three American GIs, the loss of an Apache helicopter crew, the accidental targeting and bombing of a convoy of refugees or the Chinese Embassy, the first lady visiting a refugee camp. The Serbian government is adept at manipulating for their own advantage incidents of civilian deaths caused by NATO war planes.

The debate now centers increasingly on whether we should commit American foot soldiers. There are

strong and reasonable arguments for and against taking such an action. But let us make sure that we and our leaders talk about what this means in real terms. An exchange between reporter Jessica Lee and John Warner, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, printed April 15 in USA Today reminds us of how much we all try to avoid talking about the nasty business of warfare:



Thomas Palaima

Lee: What about the ground? Aren't troops being put into Albania to protect costly equipment?

Warner: We are putting the necessary troop deployment to maintain Apache helicopters and conduct perimeter security.

Lee: Is that repositioning ground troops in preparation for a wider attack?

Warner: I wouldn't say it's repositioning. We are positioning non-flying personnel essential to ... making this helicopter a viable weapon.

Lee bluntly "grounds" the men and women who do our fighting for us. "What about the ground?" she asks. She calls them "troops" and "ground troops." She puts them on their legs and feet in the Balkans

where they will be exposed to harm and death. Sen. Warner avoids the word "ground" completely. In his depersonalized language, our national decision is far removed from human lives. There are no "soldiers" and no "troops."

"Non-flying personnel" reminded a Vietnam veteran friend of mine of the way in which the psychological damage of war has gradually been abstracted to make it less real. What started out as the visceral 'shell shock' became the far less threatening 'battle fatigue,' as if a brief vacation could reverse its effects. Now it is known by its clinical acronym PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) so we can concentrate on science and not on the human sufferer.

A simple rule of thumb, followed here by a skilled reporter and emphasized by George Orwell in his discussions of political language, is to be suspicious of polysyllabic abstractions. We should much prefer the way in which LBJ eventually spoke to us about Vietnam: "There will be more cost and more loss." These eight one-syllable words let our entire nation know what our fighting forces were in for. Another rule of thumb is to try to become the informed electorate our founding fathers had in mind when entrusting to us the right to vote.

Since the factors at work in the Balkans raise the

specter of the kind of war we fought in Vietnam, go and talk to a relative or friend who has served in combat. Read the letters in "Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam" or hear them read with documentary footage in the HBO film of the same title. Then listen to the veterans who are now the military or political leaders of our country and who speak with the authority of experience. You will find them on either side of the argument. Or if one sound bite must do, listen to Sp/4 George Olsen of the 75th Infantry, KIA March 3, 1970:

"One other impression from that patrol is that anyone over here who walks more than 50 feet through elephant grass should automatically get a Purple Heart. Try to imagine grass 8 to 15 feet high so thick as to cut visibility to one yard, possessing razor-sharp edges. Then try to imagine walking through it while all around you are men possessing the latest automatic weapons who desperately want to kill you. You'd be amazed at how a man can age on one patrol."

But whatever you do, think before our fighting men and women step.

Palaima teaches a seminar on "war and violence" in the Plan II Honors program at UT-Austin.

Austin American-Statesman
May 19, 1999 A 13