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Commentary

In the final analysis there is but one truth: War is stupid

"John and Linda Live in Omaha / Joe is somewhere on the road / We lost Davey in the Korean War / And I still don't know what for / Don't matter any more." ("Hello in There" by John Prine ©1971)

My own feelings about using "pre-emptive military force" against Iraq are like the old narrator's in John Prine's song, hopeless feelings. His wife stares endlessly out through the back door screen, and he finally gives up searching for meaning in the death of a son in a remote "military action" 20 years before. He decides, in Vietnam-speak, that it "don't mean nothin'" and lives on in bewildered and lonely sadness.

For many Americans, serious thinking about attacking Iraq, even when it is presented in White House-speak as a "defensive action," is so confusing that feelings are what really matter, feelings about patriotism, about defending our country and our families and our children, about wanting to exact some measure of vengeance from the area of the world

that brought terrorism and an unending afterlife of terror to American soil, about wanting to use our enormous power to do one clear good (to remove an oppressive dictator) that we didn't do 12 years ago, and about acting as a hyperpower in what the White House views as our own and the world's best interests, even if long-standing allies don't see things as we do.

There are countervailing feelings, too. I came home one day just before Valentine's Day and found my 8-year-old son, James, sad and crying and talking with his mother. His second-grade teacher, Mrs. Rife, had read to his class Patricia Polacco's classic American Civil War story "Pink and Say" about two young soldiers, one African American, Pink, and one white, Say. Pink helps Say survive wounding in battle. By working together, they make it back to Pink's home where Pink's slave mother nurses Say back to health. But confederate marauders come and shoot Pink's mother. They hang Pink and ship Say off to hellish starvation in the Andersonville prisoner-of-war camp. Say does survive to tell his story. A true war story. A sad story.

James expressed his sadness this way, "Why do people have to fight

wars? Wars are stupid. Why do people have to fight over a piece of land?" My answers about good and bad reasons for wars, about freeing the slaves and preserving the union, about good people using all means to prevent going to war and sometimes having to make war because of bad people, only addressed the why. They did not offer comfort about his one strong truth: Wars are stupid, and most stupid in the endless sorrow they cause.

I also told James what he already knew from my reading Homer and Hesiod in his classes. Beginning with the ancient Greeks, western civilizations have always fought wars and fought them well. The Greek national epics are full of brutal war and gruesome, unglamorous death. Homer nearly exhausts himself in describing war (polemos). He uses 19 different adjectives, among them "man-wasting," "hateful," "tearful," "woeful," "evil," "piercing," "jagged," "savage," "bloody" and, with greatest insight, "unabating." Not one is good.

In Hesiod's account of the creation of the world and the battles between successive generations of gods, the metanarrative lesson for us humans is that conflicts are resolved by violence. After I read Hesiod's "Theogony" to

James' class, he was disappointed that these gods and monsters did not use intelligence, like the best superheroes he knew. They simply tried to overwhelm one another by hurling boulders and thunderbolts and unleashing fires, winds and earthquakes. They just weren't smart, even in using force. And after all their bloody combat, after nearly destroying heaven, earth and the netherworld, the sad fact was that life for human beings under Zeus was still randomly cruel and stupidly violent.

Sadder still is Homer's accurate description of joy experienced in war, a joy documented in veterans' accounts, most vividly in Austinite Bill Broyles' classic 1984 Esquire essay, "Why Men Love War." This joy comes through despite the epic list of negative descriptions of war itself.

Nonetheless, for Homer, for Broyles, and for wise leaders, the words of Croesus, once-powerful king of Lydia, to Cyrus, founder of the great Persian empire, as reported by Herodotus, speak the final truth: "No one is fool enough to choose war instead of peace — in peace sons bury fathers, but in war fathers bury sons."

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