

Commentary

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

War is our reality, and we shouldn't turn away from it

"For war, consisteth not in battle only."

— Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 13

Pace on Earth. Good Will to Men." Americans, Brits, Australians, Poles, Bulgarians, Spaniards and many Iraqis and Afghans wished such wishes or their heartfelt equivalents in the last weeks of 2003. Now we all return to realities that our soldiers in the field never left.



One of those realities is that war is a constant. The ancient Greeks knew this. Historian Bruno Keil long ago noted that for the Greeks "peace was a contractual interruption of war, war was not an interruption of peace." Greek city-states never made peace. They made truces for periods of 10 days to 30 years, expecting that war would start again. In 421 B.C.E., the Spartans and Athenians were so worn out by war that they contracted a wishful 50-year truce. They were fighting again within three years.

Nothing has improved since then. Hobbes thought nations are virtually always at war with each other. Gen.

Douglass MacArthur in July 1935 calculated that "[i]n the last 3,400 years only 268—less than 1 in 13—have been free from wars."

So let us keep war and its costs firmly in mind. President Bush two years ago explained why he was using formal military force in a new war against terrorism and how long it would take to win, maybe decades or more.

Nonetheless, in Iraq, we hastily declared an end to our "combat phase" as if we could wish away the continuing guerrilla and terrorist attacks on coalition troops. There have now been more than 480 U.S. military fatalities and nearly 2,800 wounded in Iraq. Sixteen American soldiers died there in the first eight days of this not-so-peaceful new year. Forty-three U.S. military fatalities were reported in Afghanistan in 2003. National Guard Sgt. Theodore L. Perreault was killed two days before Christmas. Mortar fire, rocket attacks, rifle ambushes, and car and donkey-cart bombs put coalition soldiers at risk everywhere and always.

Euphoric British and Australian plans last April and May to rapidly reduce or totally withdraw their troops have been reversed. All of Australia's 2,000 troops were supposed to be pulled out by June. On Nov. 15, the remaining

850 were extended another six months. And British foreign secretary Jack Straw recently admitted, "I can't say whether [British troop withdrawal] is going to be 2006 or 2007."

Our troops will face more violence as we try to bring the ethnically and religiously divided Iraqis workable western-style democracy and a stable peace. LBJ School Dean Ed Dorn's Jan. 5 column in the *American-Statesman* lays out the logistics and dollar costs of recruiting and rotating American troops in and out of Iraq and supporting them for the now-projected two or three-year stabilization period.

As citizens, we can take a New Year's resolution to see the war in Iraq as just that, a protracted war. We cannot go back and debate whether we should have addressed terrorism in some other way. We stand and walk on the path of war.

In January 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed Americans in his State of the Union speech at an equally trying time at home and abroad. He reminded us all that the "genius of the American political system has always been best expressed through creative debate that offers choices and reasonable alternatives. Throughout our history, great Republicans and Democrats have

seemed to understand this." Let us demand as citizens that our elected representatives, Republicans and Democrats, aspire to be likewise great for the sake of our soldiers.

Johnson also told us frankly that in the overseas war we were then fighting, "[w]e face more cost, more loss, and more agony. For the end is not yet." These words still echo clearly after 37 years.

You will not find the war on front pages any more. Redistricting maps, University of Texas football coaching changes, even long-dead Princess Diana are our headline news. But you can find the real human cost and real human loss for Americans at lunaville.org/warcasualties/Summary.aspx.

Whatever your political viewpoint, you owe it to our soldiers in the field to visit this Web site daily. We should not shy away for political reasons from recognizing such collective sacrifice. We should not debate in abstract terms. We should not honor those who lose their lives and limbs in the service of our country many years later, and then only with hard chisels and cold stone.

Palaima is a classics professor at the University of Texas at Austin.