

## Opinion

### Will debates force an end to playing politics with lives?

By Tom Palaima -- Special To *The Sacramento Bee*  
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If you have seen the film "Black Hawk Down" or read "We Were Soldiers Once and Young" or visited the Imperial War Museum in London, you might think, as Douglas MacArthur did, that Plato said, "Only the dead have seen an end to war."  
Plato could have, but he didn't.

It was George Santayana, looking at World War I veterans celebrating in a British pub, who uttered the sad words: "The poor fellows think they are safe! They think that the war is over! Only the dead have seen the end of war." American soldiers see no end to war in Iraq. Yet both presidential candidates have avoided telling us what they will do with our soldiers and our weapons if they are elected in about five weeks.

Do we even want to know? President Bush says he will stand firm. But this is easier to do in Alabama and Washington than in Fallujah. He also now wants United Nations leaders, or rather their soldiers, to stand firm with our soldiers in the war zone our senators and representatives gave him the authority to create.

Sen. John Kerry has his own vague approach to strengthen our shrinking coalition of the increasingly unwilling. European countries whose families still remember the Somme, Stalingrad and Dien Bien Phu will send their soldiers off to a new locus of sorrow. Our one relevant cultural memory, Vietnam, has disappeared in a political shell game concerning old service records and old combat medals.

Will the presidential debates force the candidates to stop playing politics with American and Iraqi lives? Is there any journalist with enough authority and integrity, and plain guts, to be our elder Cato and stay on message with a handful of questions? What do these two men who would be our commander-in-chief for the next four years think of the recent assessment of the leading Iraq expert at the Army War College's strategic studies institute that the insurgency in Iraq cannot be killed by our overwhelming firepower? Is the professor of strategy at the Air War College in need of new glasses when he sees "no ray of light on the Iraqi horizon"? Things have reached the point where Americans deserve straight answers to the kinds of moral questions soldier poet Siegfried Sassoon posed as he waded resolutely out of the killing trenches of World War I and back to London: What are our set aims? What is our time limit for accomplishing them? What price are we willing to pay in human lives? And whose lives will we pay? And where is peace?

We have in the last 70 years increasingly sought and achieved peace through desolation. Since Oswald Spengler published his "The Decline of the West" after World War I, the United States has been seen, quite rightly, as a Roman civilizing presence in the world. We build things - roads, arenas, luxury villas - and we destroy things with the same energetic efficiency. We use pragmatic Roman methods as we try to shape world affairs to our purposes.

The Roman historian Tacitus put it this way: "Where they make a desolation, they call it peace." Ali Adr, a temporarily dispersed pro-Sadr fighter, I am sure has never read Roman history. But he is bluntly Tacitean: "The Americans destroy, we build." We destroy. And destroying brought a long period of peace, at least in Europe and the United States, until what H.G. Wells would call man's beast nature crept back in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in lower Manhattan. And our response has been the same as ever: overwhelming force.

In April 1967, Martin Luther King reasoned that his own government was "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." And we were once openly glad of it. We dropped 1.36 million tons of bombs on Germany. One hundred and sixty thousand tons of bombs incinerated 66 Japanese cities. We then moved into the atomic age, and Nagasaki and Hiroshima joined the list.

Our men came home, my father and father-in-law among them. We had peace. What Bob Dylan called the "big bombs and death planes" secured that peace.

We thought we had to make it even more secure. So we began dropping 7,078,032 tons of bombs on a single small country in southeast Asia, a thousand pounds for every living soul. Peace came there, too, but no victory. And our men came home, give or take 58,226.

Those whose names are etched in mirrored stone a short distance from White House and Congress died by degrees. No more than 300 in any set battle. At most 543 in a week.

Only the dead see the end of war. But we the living decide who will die, and when, and for what.

And we and our next president need to reach a moral decision. Now.

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### **About the Writer**

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