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## **COMMENTARY**

**Palaima: Longing for an America that's no longer with us**

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'America, love it or leave it' was an ultimatum, and a bumper sticker, popular in the late '60s among the silent majority when it wanted to say something. Just over 36 years ago, President Richard Nixon delivered his famous Silent Majority speech. In it, he laid out our troubles in Vietnam and at home; he surveyed our available options for "bringing peace" to Vietnam - and to us.

Nixon, as we know him from his own White House tapes, was not a nice guy. He privately spewed racist and anti-Semitic comments. He proposed to Henry Kissinger that he not rule out thinking big - i.e., using the atomic bomb in southeast Asia.

But in his official role as president on Nov. 3, 1969, Nixon publicly recognized the right of those who opposed the war to speak freely and in good conscience. He was forthright and presidential:

"Honest and patriotic Americans have reached different conclusions as to how peace should be achieved. In San Francisco a few weeks ago, I saw demonstrators carrying signs reading: 'Lose in Vietnam, bring the boys home.' Well, one of the strengths of our free society is that any American has a right to reach that conclusion and to advocate that point of view."

At that point, 31,000 Americans had been killed in action. The training program to hand the war over to the South Vietnamese was behind schedule. We had been at war for four years but involved in Vietnam for 15. This parallels our own long-term attention to Iraq, beginning well before Operation Desert Storm and including the fly-overs and embargoes leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The question we might now ask is, "What happens when the America we love leaves us?" I mean the America we once knew - America in the late 1940s and '50s. That America had its serious flaws, but that America and its leaders tried to do many right things. America led the defense of the free world. As a conqueror, it offered help to the conquered. That America had learned hard lessons during the Depression and World War II. It used big government to address three related social problems - race, poverty and economic disparity.

That America came of age in the violent '60s. Its federal government was strong. Its congressional leaders and presidents of both parties paid attention to civil and human rights.

The America that left us offered a home to the United Nations, because it had seen the evil the world could do without a common place of meeting and humanitarian cooperation, without procedures for settling disputes. That America supported imposing limits on mechanized war and

what it does to armed soldiers and innocent non-combatants. That America signed all four of the revisions of the Geneva Conventions in 1949 and formally ratified them in 1955. That America tried, despite the ambiguities of Cold War conflicts, to live up its role as world leader of a free and humanistic democracy.

That America saw civil rights abuses and reacted with real courage in support of nonviolent means of guaranteeing basic human freedoms. Its federal government and its Supreme Court played activist roles in correcting social injustices. That America launched a war on poverty. Both Democratic and Republican presidents supported that good war.

Is it forgotten that Nixon again rose to the occasion as our leader and proposed the Family Assistance Program? It would have guaranteed income to single-parent families and the working poor. Do we forget that he worked to further desegregation by setting up biracial state committees throughout the South?

That America and that kind of leader have left us. We now live in an America whose president and attorney general manipulate legal language to justify the torture, or its equivalent, of prisoners in its "war on terror." They themselves have never been at risk of being prisoners. Former POW John McCain is in the forefront of the debate on torture policies that disgrace our national morality.

In today's America, a war veteran congressman enriches himself with bribes from immoral contractors, while our soldiers suffer and die in Iraq. The White House in today's America does not honor the right of fellow Americans to express different views. It attacks distinguished opposition leaders, including war veterans, as unpatriotic cowards for their political opinions. And White House-aligned conservative strategists and talking heads use trigger issues such as gay marriage, the long-unburnt American flag and the "X" in Christmas - it ironically stands for "khi," the first letter in the Greek name for "the anointed one," Khristos - to sow discord among citizens.

I know we cannot bring back the old America. But I would trade George Bush straight up for Richard Nixon.

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