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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Don't let hope cloud your judgment

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When Alexander Pope wrote his famous line "Hope springs eternal in the human breast" in 1734, he was questioning how we are to understand evil in our lives within the context of a divine plan that we cannot know.

Hope is a hot item these days. Barack Obama's book "The Audacity of Hope" makes it the central message of his campaign. Americans have responded. "Audacity" is ranked 437 on Amazon.com.

Until Mike Huckabee gave up hope of winning the Republican presidential nomination, the former Arkansas governor had a "Hope for America" Political Action Committee. He ran as the Man of Hope who "truly grew up in Hope, Arkansas."

Huckabee was the anti-Bill Clinton. Republicans remember the 1992 Democratic Convention video that proclaimed "Bill Clinton: The Man from Hope." Many Democrats whose hopes were dashed by the under-achievement of the Clinton presidency remember it, too.

Hope is our immigrant nation's prime virtue. But hope is not always what it seems.

Take Jenna Bush's book "Ana's Story: A Journey of Hope." Bush, who worked as a UNICEF intern in Latin America, tells us the story of a young woman infected at birth with HIV/AIDS. The orphaned Ana survives, finds a supportive center, falls in love and becomes pregnant at 17. Her baby, by sheer luck, is not infected with the virus. Ana's story ends hopefully.

Weigh this single feel-good tale against the effects of five years of the Bush administration's 2003 AIDS/HIV package. It severely under-funded the United Nation's Global Fund and fell short of the wise recommendation by Physicians for Human Rights to spend more money up front on vital health infrastructure.

This year's State of the Union address called for double the amount of funding requested in the president's 2003 package. But critics note that this leaves appropriations flat. And it does not factor in the negative effects on buying power of our catastrophically weakened dollar. In July 2001, the euro cost 84 cents. In January 2003, it was \$1.08. Now it's \$1.56.

The administration insists on abstinence-only programs. This puts countless young women at risk to contract AIDS and become, like Ana, pregnant as teenagers. Ana and her child beat the odds, but the hope in her story distracts us from harsher realities.

Before we let hope seduce us, we should see it as the ancient Greeks saw it. Greek gods were not all-powerful, all-knowing or all-loving. The Greeks placed little hope in them. The Greeks had no hope of any rewards in the after-life to compensate for lives of bad luck and misery, however virtuous.

What about evil? The Greeks believed that an Eve-like creation named Pandora had loosed evils upon the world. We moderns are so hopeful that we think the world's evils fit into a small jewelry box, like the one Pandora holds in Rossetti's famous 1869 painting. But the Greek Pandora opened a pithos, a huge 65-gallon storage jar full of evils. Hope stayed on the lip of the jar, symbolic of its ambivalent nature. It can be good and pull us through hard times. But it can be evil and lead us to ruin.

Hope deceived American homebuyers who gambled that everything would turn out OK with the subprime mortgages that banks and mortgage brokers were peddling. On March 10, hope deceived five brave American troops who trusted in Gen. David Petraeus and John McCain's claims that the surge was working. Petraeus and McCain and three Republican members of Congress symbolically strolled through Baghdad markets, under heavy security, in April 2007. And Petraeus did his own photo op walk in January 2008. When our troops left their armored personnel vehicle for an hour in a Baghdad market, it was their last hour on Earth.

Iraqi civilian witnesses expressed shock that the American soldiers would be so naive. An American official said, "Everyone is pretty mystified what that many guys were doing dismounted in that area."

Next time someone offers you hope, just say no, and think it over.

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