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The Troops Have Moved On

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NEITHER party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease."

So said Abraham Lincoln in his second inaugural address, describing a war that put 11 percent of our citizens in uniform and had by that point killed nearly one of out every seven soldiers. That his words are relevant again now is a troubling indicator of our national endurance.

We are at the outset of a long war, and not just in Iraq. Yet it is being led politically by the short-sighted, from both sides of the aisle. The deterioration of American support for the mission in Iraq is indicative not so much of our military conduct there, where real gains are coming slowly but steadily, but of chaotic leadership.

Somehow Operation Iraqi Freedom, not a large war by America's historical standards, has blossomed into a crisis of expectations that threatens our ability to react to future threats with a fist instead of five fingers. Instead of rallying we are squabbling, even as the slow fuse burns.

One party is overly sanguine, unwilling to acknowledge its errors. The other is overly maudlin, unable to forgive the same. The Bush administration seeks to insulate the public from the reality of war, placing its burden on the few. The press has tried to fill that gap by exposing the raw brutality of the insurgency; but it has often done so without context, leaving a clear implication that we can never win.

In the past, the American public could turn to its sons for martial perspective. Soldiers have historically been perhaps the country's truest reflection, a socio-economic cross-section borne from common ideals. The problem is, this war is not being fought by World War II's citizen-soldiers. Nor is it fought by Vietnam's draftees. Its wages are paid by a small cadre of volunteers that composes about one-tenth of 1 percent of the population — America's warrior class.

The insular nature of this group — and a war that has spiraled into politicization — has left the Americans disconnected and confused. It's as if they have been invited into the owner's box to settle a first-quarter disagreement on the coach's play-calling. Not only are they unprepared to talk play selection, most have never even seen a football game.

This confusion, in turn, affects our warriors, who are frustrated by the country's lack of cohesion and the depiction of their war. Iraq hasn't been easy on the military, either. But the strength of our warriors is their ability to adapt.

First, in battle you move forward from where you are, not where you want to be. No one was more surprised that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction than the soldiers who rolled into Iraq in full chemical protective gear. But it is time for the rest of the country to do what the military was forced to: get over it.

If we can put 2003's debates behind us, there is a swath of common ground on which to focus. Both Republicans and Democrats agree we cannot lose Iraq. The general insurgency in Iraq imperils our national interest and the hardcore insurgents are our mortal enemies. Talking of troop reductions is to lose sight of the goal.

Second, America's conscience is one of its greatest strengths. But self-flagellation, especially in the early stages of a war against an enemy whose worldview is uncompromising, is absolutely hazardous. Three years gone and Iraq's most famous soldiers are Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England, a victim and a criminal, respectively. Abu Ghraib remains the most famous battle of the war.

Soldiers are sick of apologizing for a sliver of malcontents who are not at all representative of the new breed. But they are also sick of being pitied. Our warriors are the hunters, not the hunted, and we should celebrate them as we did in the past, for while our tastes have changed, warfare — and the need to cultivate national guardians — has not. As Kipling wrote, "The strength of the pack is the wolf."

Finally, today's debates are not high-spirited so much as mean-spirited. To allow polarizing forces to dominate the argument by insinuating false motives on one side or a lack of patriotism on the other is to obscure long-term security decisions that have to be made now.

We are clashing with an enemy who has been at war with us in one form or another for two decades. Our military response may take decades more. We have crossed several rivers and the nation is hoping that ahead lie streams. But if they are oceans, we should heed Lincoln's call: "With malice toward none, with charity for all ... let us strive on to finish the work we are in."

Owen West, a reserve Marine major who served in Iraq, is a founder of Vets for Freedom.