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Aid and Comfort

How the West wins, despite being more transparent and self-critical

by Michael Coblenz, Guest Contributor
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Critics of President Bush and his handling of the war in Iraq are often accused of giving aid and comfort to the enemy. To criticize, goes the logic, is to risk damaging troop morale, thereby giving aid and comfort to America's enemies. As conservative commentator Bill O'Reilly said, "You don't criticize the commander-in-chief in the middle of a firefight. That could be construed as putting U.S. forces in jeopardy and undermining morale."

When asked in his prime time press conference this past April about comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam, Bush himself endorsed this view, "I think the analogy is false," said the President. "I also happen to think that analogy sends the wrong message to our troops and sends the wrong message to the enemy."

There is some superficial logic to the "aid and comfort" criticism, but history proves this assertion wrong. In fact, a healthy debate is actually the best way to win the war on terror. Societies that are open about the aims of their war efforts and debate war strategies inevitably defeat closed societies that do not allow debate on any level. From my years in the Air Force, I can testify that openness and debate is as critical within the military as it is in the society at large.

The Western tradition of self-criticism

Western democracies have fought wars against various forms of closed societies since the time of the ancient Greeks (the first democracy), and the Western societies have won nearly every time. This is the thesis Victor Davis Hanson advances in his book, "Carnage and Culture." A senior fellow at the Hoover Institute, Hanson is a military historian and contributing columnist at the decidedly conservative [National Review Online](#).

Open societies win, Hanson concludes, not in spite of their openness, but precisely because of it. Openness can, in the short run, provide information to the enemy, and even cause soldiers in the field to wonder if their government fully supports them. But in the long run, in almost every conflict between a Western democracy and a closed society – from the Greek's war against the Persians in 480 B.C., to NATO's fight against an ethnic dictatorship in Kosovo in the late 1990's – open debate allowed Western societies to modify goals, define strategies and refine tactics.

In his book, Hanson briefly describes nine major battles between western societies (Greece, Rome, France, Spain, England, and the United States) and non-Western societies (Persia, Carthage, Islam, Aztecs, Zulus, Japanese, and Vietnamese). In each of these battles save one, the West won.

In many cases the Western armies (or navies) were outnumbered, and occasionally out-strategized. But in each case save one they either won the battle, or in the case of the Romans against the Carthaginians at Cannae, lost the battle but won the war. And the western society ultimately won these wars (with the exception of Vietnam) decisively.

Political debate yields military victory

Western democracies value rationalism and free inquiry. This has led to highly evolved political democracies and capitalistic free market economies, as well as great scientific and technological advances. Public debate also leads democracies to reevaluate strategies and tactics, often in the middle of a war. Western openness stands in stark contrast to the closed-mindedness and rigidity of the West's enemies. These nations were ruled by autocratic monarchs or dictators who did not allow any form of debate, either on the national level or within the ranks of the military.

When a Western army confronted a unique situation, the commander typically convened a council of subordinates to develop new tactics. Western democracies allow citizens to speak their mind and consequently there was never a shortage of suggestions. Those the West fought tended not to have a similar tradition. These societies, and their armies, generally looked to a single great leader for every answer, and such hierarchy proved disastrous time and time again.

The soldiers in Western armies, from the Greeks who fought at Salamis to the Americans at Midway, had some say in both their government's policies and battlefield tactics. The soldiers they fought against, whether Persians, Carthaginians, or Japanese, were required to follow blindly.

In all of the wars analyzed by Hanson, there was national debate in the West, and no debate in the non-Western nations. Many prominent citizens throughout history were critical of their nation's wars. Plato called the Greek naval victory against the Persian at Salamis a mistake, and Abraham Lincoln said that the Mexican-American War of 1848 was "unnecessarily and unconstitutionally commenced by the President." Open political debate allowed Western nations to change course where necessary and forced leaders to account for public opinion in their decision making.

Why the war on terror is no different

If we can honestly debate the War on Terror and the problems in the Middle East - religious fundamentalism, the lack of democracy, etc. - we will win; the less we analyze alternatives, the harder the fight will be. Victory may not be easy or quick, but it will be certain, because we will figure out the best way to win, while our enemies, who have no tradition of open debate, will not.

Fortunately, a willingness to analyze problems and alter tactics still exists on the operational level. This was evident recently when the Marines changed tactics in their fight against forces loyal to radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in the holy city of Najaf. Regrettably, the Bush administration wants to deny the same kind of healthy debate on the national level.

The situation might be different if the current policy in Iraq was clearly successful, but most people agree that it is not. Why follow a policy that isn't working? History and common sense suggest that the best thing to do is to discuss possible alternatives. The wrong approach is to ignore alternatives, denigrate critics, and stifle the very debate that could produce a better solution.

But what about the idea that the morale of the troops in the field is damaged when people criticize the war back home? In an atmosphere where everyone on every side wants to "support the troops," this argument is a handy cudgel the administration's supporters use to beat back dissent. But the discussion in Washington shouldn't harm our soldiers' morale, because the debate is about how to win the war. We best serve our soldiers by developing a winning strategy, not by blindly following an ineffective one. And if you were spending your nights patrolling the streets of Fallujah, what would be more damaging to your morale: a stinging op-ed criticizing the President, or the news that you'll be spending another three months in Iraq, when you thought you were going home?

Any comfort that al Qaeda might gain by a bruising debate should be tempered by the knowledge that we are debating the best way to destroy their warped world view. Despite what some conservatives contend, none of the rational critics are suggesting that we not bother fighting terrorism. The critics are trying to find the best solution to defeating terrorism. This is true of the Democrats who say the war in Iraq is a distraction in the War on Terror, and it is true of the Republicans holding hearings into the prison abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib. If anyone should fear criticism of President Bush, it's Osama bin Laden.

We will only win the war on terrorism if we honestly debate the best ways to do it. It is not unpatriotic to debate the issues; rather it is unpatriotic – and self-defeating – to prevent that debate.

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