



Cal Thomas Still Wrong on Iraq

Thomas doesn't mention it, but there are also many who will be "home for Christmas" in wheelchairs, with limbs missing or with eyes blinded as the cost of their service. That, too, will bring a note of sadness to their families' Christmas celebrations, however brave the wounded warriors may be in hiding their physical and emotional pain. Thomas, who served with Armed Forces Radio in the 1960s, rightly honors those who have chosen to give precious years of their lives in military service when most young adults, fresh out of school, devote their time and energy to money-making, pleasure-seeking, and other forms of self-gratification. He wrote of the wreaths volunteers place on all the tombstones in Arlington National Cemetery this time each year, and how fitting it is that the cemetery lies so near the Pentagon. "Veterans cemeteries ought to remind civilians, as well as generals, that war should never be entered into lightly, but rather always as a last resort," he wrote.



'Tis the season to be sentimental, to think noble thoughts, put aside old grievances and listen to what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature." Yet it seems a bit ironic that Thomas, one of the leading hawks in Washington's flock of right-wing pundits, would solemnly remind us that war should be considered "always as a last resort."

That last resort might as well be a grand hotel, for all the reluctance Washington's desktop warriors show at driving the nation to it. The "last resort" has become a meaningless phrase, tossed into talk of the next war as a sop for those who may still have qualms about killing people in distant lands who have never harmed or threatened us. General Colin Powell, Secretary of State during the George W. Bush administration, was widely reported to be reluctant to join the drumbeat for war with Iraq. Yet eventually he, too, fell in line, calling the war a "last resort" and making what turned out to be a bogus case for it at the United Nations. In the months and weeks leading up to the war, Bush spoke of what America must do "if war is forced upon us."

It was, in fact, a "war of choice," as George Will and other columnists and commentators who supported the war have acknowledged. It was a war looking for a reason to happen. And cherry-picking through the intelligence reports, Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, et al, found their reasons.

Driving past the cemetery, Thomas recalled lines from "America the Beautiful":

O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife,



Who more than self their country loved,
And mercy more than life!

Yes, even in this “narcissistic age” that Thomas describes, America herself always acts nobly and beautifully. All our motives are selfless and all our strife is liberating. It's never about “o-i-l,” as then-Secretary of State James Baker spelled it out prior to the first Gulf War, when it became our self-imposed duty to liberate Kuwait from Iraq. It's never about throwing our high-tech, superpower weight against small, backward countries to show the world we can crush them. It's not about highly lucrative missions for well-connected military contractors. It's not even about a petulant President wanting to settle a score left over from his daddy's administration. No, it's always “liberating strife.”

When the Iraq War started on March 19, 2003, Thomas did not wait long to claim victory and gloat over it. In a [column](#) dated March 25, he hailed “this noble venture to free an oppressed people and to make our own country safer and better able to defend itself against the ‘axis of evil.’” And we would do more than simply free the people from the tyrannical regime of Saddam Hussein, which our troops accomplished in rather short order. Just a few short years after candidate George W. Bush declared his opposition to nation-building, we would create a new government in Baghdad.

“Have we not declared our intention to install a democratic government in Iraq, run by Iraqis and not the United States, as soon as it is feasible?” Thomas asked rhetorically. Democracy, in Thomas's mind, must be the equivalent of charity, for it “covereth a multitude of sins.” It doesn't matter that we launched an unprovoked invasion of a country far from our shores. Never mind how many people were killed and maimed as war planes rained death and destruction in a cruelly ironic “shock-and-awe” display of loving “mercy more than life.” Forget how many were left homeless and in refugee camps both within and outside Iraq. All that matters is our good “intention to install a democratic government” for the people of Iraq — whether they want it or not.

Nearly nine years of war in Iraq have left more than 4,400 Americans dead and some 32,000 wounded. Estimates of Iraqi deaths vary, but even the most conservative estimates have them at more than 100,000. Iraqis and Americans still fear for their lives anywhere outside the heavily fortified Baghdad Airport or the “Green Zone” surrounding the government in the nation's capital. The country's Shiite president is after the Sunni vice president for allegedly leading a death squad. The vice president has fled to the region of Kurdistan to escape arrest. Perhaps that “democratic government” is not quite “feasible” yet.

Thomas in that 2003 column sought to buttress his argument against the “naysayers” with quotations from Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Somerset Maugham. “Experience informs us that the first defense of weak minds is to recriminate,” said Coleridge, though that hardly stopped Thomas from launching recriminations of his own.

“The gloom-and-doom prophets of disaster — from Jimmy Carter, to Walter Cronkite, to the editorial pages of the *New York Times* — ought to acknowledge they were wrong. But they won't,” Thomas wrote when the war had just begun. From Maugham, he extracted this pearl of wisdom: “Like all weak men he laid an exaggerated stress on not changing one's mind.”

Cal Thomas is still waxing eloquent about our nation's “liberating strife” in Iraq, as he meditates on all those tombstones, decorated with all those wreaths, at Arlington National Cemetery. He hasn't changed his mind. He should admit that he, like many others, was wrong.

But he won't.



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