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## How to Think About the War

By [Herbert E. Meyer](#)

Whether we are winning or losing in Iraq is open to debate, but it's clear that our national conversation about the war has begun to fail. Today our elected leaders, our most influential commentators, and even ordinary Americans chatting among themselves at work or at their dinner tables, have begun to repeat their lines like wind-up dolls. All of them, and all of us, are saying the same things over and over again; what started as a conversation has become a shouting match. And when everyone is on "transmit" - but never on "receive" - we cannot hear and so we cannot learn. And if we cannot learn, we've stopped thinking.

We need to start all over again to think about the war, and we mustn't be afraid. After all, we do this with our computers all the time. When a program begins to fail - and they always do because even the simplest program is comprised of complex files that over time become damaged or corrupted -- and when re-booting once or twice doesn't do the trick, we've learned that the only thing to do is to un-install and re-install the program to get a fresh, clean start.

So, let's conduct what scientists would call a "thought experiment." In your mind's eye, go to Control Panel, click on "Add/Remove Programs," scroll down to "The War" and double-click. A box will pop on-screen asking if you really want to un-install. Click "Yes" and you will hear the hard drive chunking and see its green light flashing while the program is removed. Now, let's "re-install" the program in our minds by thinking through, from the beginning, what this war is about:

### **What "Politics" Really Means**

When we talk about politics, we usually mean Republicans versus Democrats, or liberals against conservatives, or the looming scramble among Presidential contenders for their parties' 2008 nominations. But there's another way to talk about politics that goes deeper, and by doing so illuminates the current conflict.

Politics is the relationship between the individual and the State. And for as long as human beings have walked the Earth, we have been struggling to get this right. We've tried everything. We've had kingdoms and empires of all sizes and flavors. We've had military dictatorships, and civilian dictatorships. We've had totalitarian states like fascism on the right, and communism on the left. We've had constitutional monarchies, republics and democracies.

In a sense, each of these is an operating system. Now, we're all familiar with operating systems because we all use computers. Today, for instance, we have Microsoft's Windows operating system, Apple's OS X, Linux, and a few others. Every so often, these operating systems rub against one another in the marketplace. The results can be fairly nasty - technically and legally - but in the end these competing operating systems usually learn to live with one another. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, and consumers choose the ones they prefer.

Every so often - in business and in politics - one operating system sets out to utterly destroy all the others. In business, this goal is rarely achieved. Microsoft has a lot of money, but it hasn't got tanks. (If it did, Apple's corporate headquarters would look like a building in downtown Beirut.) But in politics, there really are tanks and other weapons. And when one political operating system sets out to obliterate all the others, the result is a global war.

If Adolf Hitler had been content to remain within Germany's borders, the results of the Nazi operating system would have been ghastly for the German people. But there would not have been World War II. If Lenin, Stalin and their heirs had been content to inflict communism solely within the Soviet Union's borders, life would have been miserable for Soviet citizens. But there would not have been a Cold War.

Now, when you look at history through the prism of operating systems, you find that one operating system has triumphed above all the others: Western Civilization. Its key features are the separation of church and state, the primacy of the individual over the State, the encouragement of artistic expression and intellectual curiosity, free enterprise, and a never-ending struggle to reach equality among the races and sexes. Like all operating systems, Western Civilization has its flaws, its shortcomings and its imperfections - as will any operating system designed and run by human beings. But by any imaginable measure, Western Civilization is history's greatest achievement.

### **Let's Call it "Radical Islam"**

While Western Civilization developed through the centuries, another operating system also took root. Scholars argue over just what to call this operating system, but for convenience's sake let's call it Radical Islam. Its key features are the combination of church and State, the submission of individuals to this combination, the discouragement of artistic expression and intellectual curiosity, the crushing of its people's entrepreneurial talents, and the treatment of women as though they were property rather than people. Just like Western Civilization, this operating system has its flaws, its shortcomings and its imperfections. But unlike Western Civilization, Radical Islam contains a flaw that may not be correctible: it is incompatible with the modern world.

What we all learned on 9-11 is that the leaders of Radical Islam are determined to impose their operating system on us. In other words, their objective is the destruction of Western Civilization. The current conflict is our effort to prevent this from happening.

Look back at history's two most recent attacks on Western Civilization - by fascism in World War II, and by Soviet communism in the Cold War - and you may be surprised to see how sharp were the disagreements among our leaders, our commentators, and our parents and grandparents, over how best to respond. Anyone who believes that "politics" was suspended during these wars - in Washington or at the dinner table - is just plain wrong.

But there was one issue during each of these struggles upon which virtually everyone agreed: Western Civilization deserved to win. Despite its flaws, its shortcomings, and its imperfections, our "operating system" was better than the one that threatened to obliterate us. So we would fight hard - to the death, if necessary - for our survival.

Now we can understand why our conversation about the present conflict has become so fierce, so bitter, and so partisan. Today, there is a significant contingent among us who do not believe that Western Civilization is worth defending, or that our operating system deserves to survive. Those who subscribe to this perception - and they include quite a few of our elected officials - are so focused on the flaws, shortcomings and imperfections of Western Civilization that they are blind to its achievements. So while some of us are debating how to win the war, others among us want only to stop the war. This is why we are not so much talking among ourselves about what to do, but rather talking - shouting, really - past one another.

Simply put, the first decision we need to make is this: Do we intend to win this war whatever the cost? If the answer is "no," then stopping the war now is the only sensible thing to do. It would mean we have

chosen to surrender Western Civilization to its enemies, and that we or, more likely, our children and grand-children, will live under the Radical Islam operating system.

If our answer is "yes" - that we intend to win this war whatever the cost - then we had better be prepared to fight with all our strength and power. To understand why, look back at our strategies for winning World War II and the Cold War. In each of these conflicts, our objective wasn't to kill people but rather to crush an operating system. We understood that most Germans weren't Nazis, and that most Russians weren't communists. They weren't the problem; it was the operating system imposed on them by their leaders that threatened us.

## **How the Cold War Ended**

In the Cold War, we were able to crush the Soviet communist operating system without a great deal of violence - a staggering achievement for which, one day, Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Pope John-Paul II will be celebrated by history. The Cold War ended in 1991, when the Soviet Union ceased to exist. But in World War II, we had no choice but to shoot and bomb our way through Italy, to flatten Germany, and to drop two nuclear bombs on Japan. It was horrific, but it worked. The war ended, the fascist operating system ceased to exist, and the people on whom this operating system had been imposed found their way forward. Japan joined Western Civilization, and Italy and Germany re-joined it.

Although no one seems to have noticed, our strategy for winning the current conflict is strikingly similar to our strategies in the previous conflicts. Our enemies aren't the people on whom the Radical Islam operating system has been imposed, but rather the operating system itself. We are using military power, both in Afghanistan and Iraq, to give moderate Muslims, who comprise the vast majority, the first chance they have had to hold power in a long while. Our hope is that, over time, these moderates will develop an Islamic operating system that is compatible with the modern world and - more importantly - willing to co-exist peacefully with our operating system.

What the Bush Administration has now realized - belatedly - is that to achieve our objective we will need to use more violence than we had thought, and hoped, we would need. That is why the President is seriously considering sending more troops to Iraq. Simply put, we haven't hit the Radical Islam operating system hard enough to crush it. And this means the real issue isn't the number of soldiers we send to Iraq, and perhaps to Afghanistan, but the orders that President Bush gives to our military commanders.

If the President orders our commanders to do the best they can with additional troops to get Baghdad under control, we will merely delay our defeat and suffer more casualties along the way. But if the President's orders are to crush the Radical Islam operating system once and for all - get set for a level of violence we haven't seen since the darkest days of World War II.

When General William Tecumseh Sherman said that "War is hell," he wasn't talking about soldiers fighting soldiers. He meant that to end a war it is necessary to inflict such pain on the civilian population that it will no longer tolerate the war's continuation. That's because no army can keep fighting without at least the tacit support of the civilian population on whose territory it operates. War isn't laser surgery, no matter how technically advanced may be the weapons. War is a miserable, sloppy business in which innocent people suffer greatly. Sherman hated marching through Georgia and inflicting pain on decent people who happened to be living there, but he understood that doing this was the only way to end the war.

## **Widening the War**

The violence we will need to inflict to win won't be limited to Baghdad, or even to Iraq. Just as you cannot fill a bucket with water if that bucket has two big holes in its bottom, we will not end the war in Iraq so long as Iran and Syria continue to interfere. Thus far, we have done nothing whatever to stop Iran and Syria from interfering, and unless we do we cannot win. In other words, to crush the Radical Islam operating system we will need to widen the war. More precisely, the governments of Iran and Syria must be taken out of the conflict, either by forcing these governments to cease fighting, or by removing and replacing these governments.

Honorable people will disagree over what specific steps to take, and how and when to take them. There is nothing wrong with this, and the debate itself is healthy. Indeed, our tolerance for public debate -- even during wartime -- is among the greatest strengths of Western Civilization.

But if we cannot resolve the question of whether or not we intend to win this war whatever the cost, then we will shortly lose the option of deciding. As President Lincoln said of slavery in the US, a house divided against itself cannot stand; we cannot be half-slave and half-free. It took a Civil War to resolve this issue. Today, our choice is whether to fight for Western Civilization at whatever cost, or to stop fighting and accept the gradual erosion of our operating system. And we are so divided over this question that it is scarcely an exaggeration to describe our debate as a kind of civil war. Until we resolve this question, we are stuck with half-measures that delay our defeat while also blocking the path to victory. And in war, if you aren't winning you're losing. There is nothing in between. So we must decide either to give up, or to summon the will to victory.

The trouble is, we have very little time left in which to decide. Indeed, our time to decide has just about run out.

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