



Joseph Heath

## War no Alternative to Politics

**L**ike most Canadians, I received a strong dose of anti-Americanism along with my mother's milk. In my case, it's because my mother was an American — one who, like many of her fellow citizens, left the United States during the 1960s, and renounced her citizenship in disgust over the conduct of the Vietnam war.

Later in life, living in the United States for several years allowed me to develop a much more balanced view of that country, and to appreciate its many great qualities. But it was something of an uphill struggle. I was reminded of that a couple months ago, while doing some construction work with my father. At one point he asked me to pass him the "Yankee screwdriver."

A "Yankee screwdriver," for those who don't know, is the term commonly used in various parts of Canada to refer to a hammer.

At the time I marked it down as just one more reminder of how anti-Americanism creeps into every nook and cranny of Canadian life. Yet now as I watch the United States military pounding away at targets in Iraq, in an effort to bring freedom and democracy to that foreign land, I am reminded of the Yankee screwdriver. Along with most other Canadians, I take no issue with the overall objectives of American foreign policy. But the way they are going about achieving these objectives looks to me a lot like someone trying to hammer in a screw.

Clearly there are many issues at stake in the debate between supporters and detractors of the war in Iraq. However, there is one line of thinking that has struck me as extremely pernicious. What many supporters of the war reveal through their arguments is a deep distaste for *politics* itself — combined with the thought that war might provide, in some sense, a viable alternative.

People who support the war obviously think that this invasion is going to solve more problems that it creates. They speak as though military action could cut the Gordian knot; could achieve an outcome that mere politics would be unable to secure. The inspectors and diplomats had their chance, they say, but proved unequal to the task. Now we send in the soldiers to clean things up.

**T**here is something very seductive about this thought. Politics is an activity that almost everyone instinctively despises. In politics there are no total victories, and the opposition is never silenced. Politics produces only never-ending debate, bargaining, delay, compromise, appeasement, and "tear-stained ink."

Thus it has always been tempting to portray the political impulse as fundamentally a sign of weakness. Politics is described as an activity suitable only for those who lack the courage of their convictions — the evidence being precisely their willingness to bargain them away. Since politics is fundamentally about compromise, anyone who participates in politics is automatically tainted by these charges.

It takes genuine wisdom to see what is wrong with these arguments, and to acquire an appreciation for the virtues of the political. Politics, like democracy, is a second-best solution to the problem of order — one that we adopt when we discover that all of the alternatives that are better in theory are much worse in practice.

In the modern world, military victory is becoming an increasingly ineffective substitute for politics. Back in the old days, when nations were allowed to completely crush their enemies, warfare could at least impose some semblance of order. But civilized states are no longer so unrestrained, and as a result, they

leave the enemy in place embittered and looking for revenge. The finality of military victory — traditionally praised as one of its chief virtues — disappears. The history of Israel shows how a nation can win every war, and yet not resolve any of its problems.

**T**hus the tendency to think of warfare as a substitute for politics, or even as an effective tool of politics, is becoming increasingly anachronistic. Of course, there are certain contexts in which a prior use of force is blocking political rule, and so counterforce can have beneficial consequences. Afghanistan may provide a good example. But it is very dangerous to generalize from this, and to think that the military is an all-purpose instrument that can be used to achieve any political objective.

If the goal in Iraq was purely the disarmament of Saddam Hussein's regime, then the American military is no doubt up to the task. But if the goal is to enhance the security of the United States against terrorism, or more fancifully, to promote democracy in Iraq, then it is very far from obvious that the military is a suitable instrument. Like the Yankee screwdriver, it may simply be the wrong tool for the job.

The reason that the United States is unlikely to achieve its political objectives through this war was summed up quite succinctly by an Iraqi man, who when asked by a journalist why he was resisting the United States invasion, said simply, "We don't want to become like the Palestinians." Perhaps Americans should be thinking a bit harder about how they are going to avoid becoming like the Israelis.

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