

When it comes to Iraq war, U.S. must look forward

THE ISSUE | The fifth anniversary of the beginning of war in Iraq passed this week.

OUR OPINION | Whether the invasion of Iraq was—or wasn't—the right thing to do is no longer the most important question.

Easter marks Day 5 of Year 6 of the Iraq war.

We concede that's a pessimistic way of viewing the fifth anniversary of the war, yet we believe it reflects our need to look forward in Iraq, not back to March 19, 2003.

Vice President Dick Cheney, visiting Iraq on the eve of the anniversary, stressed that the invasion had been the right thing to do.

In a speech Wednesday, President Bush—whose presidential legacy has largely been written in Iraq—echoed that sentiment.

Today, though, attempting to justify an action taken more than five years ago misses the point. It has become irrelevant whether our entry into Iraq was the right thing to do.

The point is that we did it. And beyond the initial military phase of invading Iraq, we did it extremely badly.

Our focus now must be on a strategy for extricating our forces and forcing the Iraqi government to assume control of its own country.

Preventing Iraq from becoming a terrorist haven will require diplomacy with other countries in the region, including Iran, not veiled threats of another war.

We no longer expect that from the current administration. Bush's now-familiar recitation Wednesday did nothing to encourage us in that respect.

"The answers are clear to me. Removing Saddam Hussein from power was the right decision, and this is a fight that America can and must win," Bush said.

This assumes that we will even know how to recognize "victory" in Iraq if it ever arrives. So haphazard was the post-invasion planning for this effort, so fluid have been the stated goals and accomplishments for it, that it's impossible to know now when it might be deemed a

success.

On May 1, 2003, we were told major combat operations were over in Iraq—victory.

Then came the first elections for the new Iraqi National Assembly on Jan. 30, 2005—democracy in action, with victory surely at hand.

October 2005 brought the new Iraqi constitution—an embrace of liberty unprecedented in Iraq. And on and on, with our mishandling of the occupation playing directly into the strategy of an ever-growing insurgency.

If there is one aspect of this week's anniversary that merits a look backward, it is the cost of the war.

The human toll is devastating: 3,991 Americans have been killed in Iraq as of this week. More than 300 coalition troops have died. Iraqi civilian deaths number between 82,000 and 90,000, according to Iraq Body Count, a civilian volunteer effort that scans hospital, morgue and official figures for its data.

The Pentagon says the war so far has cost \$600 billion. The Congressional Budget Office puts it between \$1 trillion and \$2 trillion. The economist Joseph E. Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate, estimates in a new book that it has cost \$4 trillion.

No matter who you believe, it's a far cry from the \$50 billion to \$60 billion the Bush administration estimated the war would cost.

This week marked the last Iraq war anniversary Bush will observe in office.

His successor must be someone who, on March 19, 2009, will observe this grim anniversary not by looking back, but by reporting progress on a plan to swiftly end this war, bring our troops home and engage the United States as a diplomatic player—rather than a ham-fisted bully—in this critical region.

ARTIST'S VIEW



COMMENTARY | LEONARD PITTS

Obama sets example

For a people so obsessed with race, we are exceptionally bad at talking about it.

Some of us fear talking about it, get nervous and flutter and act as if this is a topic polite people should avoid.

Some of us are unequipped to talk about it, too ignorant of the history that undergirds it, too willing to bend that history toward ideological ends, too blithely dismissive of the fact that history matters, that past informs present informs future.

Some of us lack the compassion to talk about it, prefer to use it only as a means of denigrating, diminishing and dismissing the Other.

Some of us are uncomfortable talking about it because it makes us feel what we'd rather not: anger, sorrow, defensiveness, guilt.

And some of us—politicians in particular—talk about race only to use it as a weapon, only as a means of hitting the other candidate.

Barack Obama spoke of race Tuesday in Philadelphia. He did so with calm confidence, with a firm grasp of, and appreciation for, the history that undergirds it, with compassion that did not stop at the color line and yet, without anger, sorrow, defensiveness, or an attempt to impose guilt, without making it a political cudgel.

"Not this time," he said. "And so," intoned Jon Stewart of "The Daily Show," "at 11 o'clock AM

on a Tuesday, a prominent politician spoke to Americans about race as though they were adults."

Obama, who has steadfastly refused to be defined or confined by race, has nevertheless seen race consume the last two weeks of his campaign. First, there was Geraldine Ferraro and her asinine contention that Obama is somehow an affirmative action candidate, that the millions of black, white and other voters who support him are somehow bewitched by the color of his skin and never mind that Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton and Alan Keyes have the same color skin, yet never enjoyed more than a fraction of his success.

More substantively, there was the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Obama's friend and former pastor. Video clips (from what source, I still can't tell) flooded the Internet showing the pastor denouncing America in coarse and strident tones. As depicted in those excerpts, Wright, who is also an avowed admirer of the hateful Louis Farrakhan, crossed the line from the incendiary truth-telling of the African-American ministerial tradition into a corrosive, paranoid, ungodly bitterness.

For Obama, the expedient and politically intelligent thing would have been to denounce Wright, cut him loose and move on. Instead, he did what Clinton did not after Ferraro shot off her mouth, what George W. Bush did not after he spoke

at Bob Jones University, what John McCain did not after he wimped out about the Confederate flag, what Ronald Reagan did not after he blessed "state's rights," what Jimmy Carter did not after he invoked "ethnic purity."

He showed courage. He seized the teachable moment. Then he taught that moment, not in the stark and simplistic black and white terms so often preferred by blacks and whites but, rather, with a sophisticated grasp of the thorny nuances of race and a compassion vast enough to comprehend not only the anger and frustration of blacks, but also that of whites—and to recognize the righteousness in both.

And Obama reminded us that anger and frustration are not destiny. "America can change," he said. "That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope, the audacity to hope, for what we can and must achieve tomorrow."

He explained America to itself. He pointed America toward higher ground. It was a brave, magnificent and—mark my words—historic moment. You see, we just lost the last excuse for our inability to talk about race.

Last week in Philadelphia, Barack Obama showed us how.

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NATIONAL VIEW | FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

A bit too close

We're willing to take Southwest Airlines executives at their word when they say that passengers were never in danger when they flew on Southwest planes that were as much as 30 months overdue for required safety inspections.

The uncomfortable question: Were they safe just because they were lucky?

The Federal Aviation Administration has proposed a \$10.2 million fine against Southwest for failing to ground 46 jets that hadn't been inspected for exterior cracks. To Southwest's credit, the FAA found out about the inspection lapse when the airline discovered it last year and owned up to it.

Still, the planes continued to fly for as many as 10 days before being inspected. During the inspections, cracks were found and repaired on six planes.

Again last week, Southwest took 38 planes out of service when it discovered that their inspections might have been flawed. Cracks were discovered and fixed on four of those planes.

Documents released by the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee show that the cracks were 1 to 3.5 inches long. Boeing, the manufacturer of the planes, says that there's no safety risk until

the cracks reach 6 inches long.

We're not comfortable with a 2.5-inch margin dividing safe airplane cracks from dangerous ones—and Southwest shouldn't be, either.

FAA inspection requirements are not designed just to catch airplanes that have crossed the border between safe and dangerous. They're designed to ensure a buffer between those extremes.

Failing to meet those requirements means that Southwest ate away some of that buffer. It is little solace that the buffer was not devoured completely.

The silver lining to this dark cloud over Southwest is that the Dallas-based airline has responded to the revelations in characteristic open fashion.

Its executives have not hidden behind a team of lawyers. Rather, they have aired their own dirty laundry and have shown their determination to have a proper inspection program. They suspended three employees involved with the inspection problems.

Openness is exactly what is needed if Southwest is to save itself from this very negative experience.

Southwest's customer base loves to love this airline. Rough patches—even very rough ones—don't destroy that kind of love. But lying or trying to hide things surely could.

COMMENTARY | TOM WALSH

Candidates lack candor on economy

I would be a lot more worked up about getting Michigan and Florida delegates seated at the Democratic National Convention this summer if we were hearing a coherent economic policy from either of the two remaining candidates.

Instead of a clear vision for how the United States can compete in the global economy of today and tomorrow, however, U.S. Sens. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are selling voters a big lie, especially in struggling industrial states like Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

The big lie goes like this: We can turn back the clock, good people, to a time when high-paying factory jobs were plentiful.

A time when workers without college degrees still could have a nice home, a couple new cars, a boat and a place Up North.

A time when Big Labor and Big Business would jaw for a while about how to divvy up the Big Profits of the American auto giants, steelmakers and airlines that ruled the world, and then promise comfy pensions and

health care for life to all.

We can turn back the clock.

All we have to do is scrap or renegotiate those awful free trade agreements, especially that nasty North American Free Trade Agreement that allows greedy companies to ship our good jobs off to other countries.

Obama and Clinton tried hard to out-anti-NAFTA one another in the recent Ohio primary, but the rhetoric was empty if not dishonest.

Obama himself got tripped up on the duplicity, when word leaked that one of his aides had quietly reassured a Canadian diplomat that President Obama wouldn't really backtrack on NAFTA, that his words were only campaign rhetoric.

Clinton, in a Detroit campaign stop Wednesday to push a do-over of the Michigan primary, cast us poor Michiganders as victims of "unfair trade policies," even though NAFTA was passed in 1994 thanks to strong support from her husband, then-President Bill Clinton, and a memorable debate triumph by then-Vice

President Al Gore over NAFTA opponent H. Ross Perot.

The reality of NAFTA is that total trade, productivity and incomes rose smartly in each NAFTA nation in the decade after the treaty was signed. And while it is undeniably true that some Michigan factory jobs are disappearing because products are imported from nations with lower labor costs, we cannot bring them back by pretending that Russia is communist, China is a closed market and India is a British colony.

Don't take this argument as merely a rant against Democrats. Sen. John McCain, the presumptive GOP nominee, looks to have an economic plan disturbingly similar to the incumbent president's—tax cuts, heavy spending on the Iraq war, equally huge budget deficits—but that's another column.

Let's push all the candidates to get real about training our workers to excel in a changing world.

■ Tom Walsh is a business columnist for the Detroit Free Press

Massa to give Kuhl a run for his money this time

Even more than before, U.S. Rep. Randy Kuhl is going to have his hands full with Eric Massa.

For that matter, I think any incumbent Republican in Washington is again going to have a tough time holding on

CITY BEAT



Jbe Dunning

to their jobs.

Although he said differently last week, it's at least part of the reason why U.S. Rep. Tom Reynolds, R-Clarence, isn't going to seek a sixth term. At age 57 and once seriously considered for House Speaker, I agree with him that "it was time" but not necessarily for the reasons he offered.

Just like in 2006, those who aligned themselves closely with President Bush and his policies could pay the price at the polls. Democrats took control of both the House and Senate two years ago mostly because Bush's war policy and questionable domestic policies acted as millstones.

Now, with the economy worsening and the Iraq war lingering, Democratic challenges like Massa have more grit for the mill than ever before.

Kuhl, who beat Massa by just a percentage point in 2006, has been a big Bush supporter throughout his two terms.

The way I see it, at least three factors helped pull Kuhl through last time.

First, Republicans outnumber Democrats in the 29th and turned out to vote.

Second, Massa was a newcomer to both politics and the district whereas Kuhl is a native with a long political history.

Third, Kuhl has a record of bringing money back to the district.

The first factor still holds true. But the second and third may have waned a bit.

Everyone still knows Randy, but Massa has been campaigning non-stop and is more of a known, or at least recognizable, figure these days.

As for Kuhl's ability to bring home the bacon, there's far less to bring home. Two years ago he ran an effective campaign ad saying he'd secured \$250 million for the district. I don't think he's come close to that number in his second term.

Without that arrow in his quiver, I look for Kuhl to be on more of the offensive than before. As he often does in his weekly conference calls to the press, he'll blast Democrats for not accomplishing much in Congress while in power. Further, he'll emphasize a record opposing new taxes and point out how he opposed some of Bush's ideas—like immigration and health care cuts.

Conversely, look for Massa to portray Kuhl as a Bush lackey and in virtual lock-step with his failed policies. It's the same strategy Massa and other Democrats used in 2006 to gain the majority in Congress.

If you consider Bush one of the worst presidents ever—think a foreign policy like Lyndon Johnson's (Vietnam) and a domestic plan like Herbert Hoover's (The Depression)—then it would be hard to look favorably on his supporters. That's the battle Kuhl must overcome to get back to Washington.

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