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Restore America's honor abroad, at home

War in Iraq has taken away the respect we once had in the world

BOB PERKOWITZ
Special to the Observer

On Sept. 11, 2002, I was riding my bicycle across Australia. I wore a red, white and blue League of American Cyclists jersey and socks that said that I was proud to be an American.

On the first anniversary of the World Trade Center attack, the emotional worldwide support for America was still vibrant.

The following two years, as I pedaled my way across Europe and South America, I no longer felt as confident being flagrantly American. Though I wore jerseys showing the continents and the flags of the countries I rode through, the usually friendly locals became questioning -- and in some instances hostile -- when they learned that I was an American.

Here in America, though, insulated from the rest of the world, our values and patriotism are only challenged as a matter of internal politics. Yet over these same years the pride of ordinary Americans in our nation seems to be dwindling.

In spite of increased pay and death benefits, our Army no longer attracts enough volunteers. The national debates, like the current divide on replacing Sandra Day O'Connor on the Supreme Court, are rancorous partisan affairs, with little concern for our common national interests.

The dwindling patriotism issue surfaced in another way in The Charlotte Observer last week. The feature story in the July 4 issue was titled "A few fight to restore Fourth's old glory: Apathy threatens celebration that once rallied community." The article stated that "We are not as inclined to publicly celebrate things like community -- or perhaps country."

It seems that the Independence Day parades that we all warmly remember are withering away. On America's national holiday, the only thing that still sparks our patriotic pride are massive fireworks displays.

The thought that Americans are not as proud of our country as we once were is upsetting. I believe, or want to believe, that Americans are as patriotic as ever.

Apparently though, we have a problem. We are losing respect from the rest of the world, and we may be losing our own self-respect.

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I think there are two reasons for our diminished pride and confidence. The first is the lack of credibility of our government. The second is that our current national priorities are not in alignment with our patriotic American values.

The biggest example of both of these is the war in Iraq. We invaded Iraq under false pretenses. President Bush himself said there is "no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved with Sept. 11," and his own extensive report on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq completely discredits the U.S. government's repeated prewar claims of their existence.

Whether we were deliberately or mistakenly misled into the Iraq war may be an open question. In either case, a majority of Americans now believe that the war is a mistake, that it was not necessary for us to invade Iraq to prevent terrorism in the United States, and that we would be better off if we set a timetable for removing our troops.

According to a Gallup poll last month, only 10 percent of Americans are "very satisfied" with the way things are going in the war on terrorism. President Bush is among that minority. He says he believes the war in Iraq is "vital to the security of our country," and "we're making really good progress in Iraq."

Vice President Dick Cheney is even more optimistic. In May, on the Larry King Show, Cheney claimed that the insurgency in Iraq was "in the last throes" of resistance.

There are some very big inconsistencies here. We all want to believe that America fights wars reluctantly for noble causes with the intent to win. Iraq is not such a war. Bad intelligence is not noble, and Bush refuses to commit the additional U.S. troops our military leaders say are required to stabilize the country.

Yet leaving Iraq presents an even more formidable problem. As Colin Powell warned before the war, "You break it, you own it."

Though it might save many American and Iraqi lives, it would be irresponsible for America to pull out and leave Iraq in potentially greater chaos.

My solution to this would be to build a democratic, multi-national coalition to explicitly aid Iraq in unconditionally establishing their democracy and provide humanitarian and developmental aid.

America is, however, unable to lead such a coalition. As we all know, President Bush has never made a mistake and he is never wrong. It will likely be 2008 or later before we can solve this problem.

In the meantime, I will ride across Asia and Africa over the next couple of years in a very understated manner.

Bob

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