

We're all responsible for Iraq

By James Reston Jr.

Between those who manage the war in Washington and those who fight it in Iraq, the American people enjoy a safe middle ground. The country is both at war and not at war. The war machine in Washington hums along as it did in other great international conflicts. U.S. troops fight as vicious a war abroad as they have ever fought. But at home, there is no sacrifice, no serious deprivations, no mobilization of youth. Life goes on pretty much as normal.

In what sense then can the average American be held accountable for the chaos of Iraq? If the citizen did not participate in any decision that led to unprovoked warfare, did not mislead anyone about weapons of mass destruction, did not engage in torture or kill any innocent civilians, does that American bear any responsibility for the mayhem that Iraq has become?

The philosophers tell us that there are four types of responsibility for which an individual and a society can be held to account for aggressive or unprovoked war. Criminal guilt applies to the power structure that drags a country into an abyss against its will or upon false pretenses, or the individuals who engage in crime on the battlefield. After Iraq, there will be no grandiose trials in which our leaders are asked to account for their deeds. There will be only a few military trials for low-level criminal soldiers. Criminal responsibility for decision-makers will be left to the opprobrium of history and to Nixonian exile.

There will, however, be a long period of collective introspection after the war. It will, hopefully, be a period of reconciliation and regeneration. The central task of the president we elect in 2008 will be to bind up the nation's wounds and to rediscover the country's fundamental bearings. Recognizing the breath of responsibility for the Iraq disaster, down to the level of the individual citizen, must be part of that process.

When guilt applies

Metaphysical guilt means that every human being is responsible for injustices committed anywhere in the world, but especially crimes that are committed in our presence and with our knowledge. Does this apply to us? The legitimization of torture is one instance that seems to fit. It has been done in our presence, with our knowledge. Or the scrapping of the Geneva Conventions. When both a nation and an American citizen acquiesce in the dissolution of accepted moral norms, metaphysical guilt applies.

The two other categories, moral and political guilt, are most pointedly relevant at this stage of the Iraq conflict. It is not enough to complain about President Bush, or to mock him. To mock the president does not relieve one from responsibility for the war being fought in the name of every American. Bush's disaster has become the country's disaster. Every American is now connected to it politically and morally. We cannot be indifferent to the scorn for all things American that characterizes the worldview of us. We must pay attention. It should move us.



By Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY

It's not enough to merely criticize the president or say you voted for another candidate. Every American citizen has a political and moral duty to do what's right for our troops, and for our country.

then tolerates the exploitation of soldiers, then that citizen is morally culpable for that outrage and a participant in it. Even during the Vietnam War, when I was a soldier for three years, no soldier was sent back to the jungle against his will for second and third tours.

Pact with our troops

There existed then, in that "immoral war," a solemn pact between the soldier and his country that was honored by the military and accepted by the soldier, even as the war was winding down toward humiliation. That pact was especially important in the years of 1969-75, when it was clear that the Vietnam War was lost, and that young men were being asked to die simply to extricate politicians from their blunders.

And so it is now. No one talks of a noble cause any longer, especially our troops. Young men are recruited merely with appeals to their testosterone. When the highest military officers now warn that this conflict is breaking the military system, it is because this honorable bond between the country and the soldier at risk is be-

and girls sign up for this? Such a question conveniently separates the citizen from the soldier.

As for political guilt, all citizens bear the responsibility for the way their country is governed. They are, therefore, liable collectively for the political decisions of those leaders they have elected, regardless of whether one voted for the winner. In the elections of 2002 and 2004, the Democrats might have halted the rush to war, but they deliberately avoided the subject. This lack of resistance permitted this war to be fought and funded as it was. The Democrats of 2002 and 2004 must share in the political and moral guilt for the calamity.

The 2006 elections was the first time the political and moral aspect of the Iraq debacle was joined. In the next election, that connection will be even more pivotal. If there is no collective grief about what has happened in Iraq, and no collective determination to change course, if the hollow drumbeat for victory and continuing wars wins out over withdrawal, then that, at the very least, will define what and who we have become, as a nation, as a people, and as individuals