

# Alarm bells should ring when adults explain war to children

## MARK VONNEGUT

Television, radio and the print media have all carried thoughtful pieces about how frightened children can become about the war. There have been interviews with psychologists and other specialists about how we should talk to children about the war.

We should reassure them that there is no danger to them and tell them they will always be loved and cared for.

Whenever we see adult consternation about how something should be explained to children, bells should go off.

The first bell is that maybe the children have it right. Their facts and projections may not be objectively correct, but maybe the feelings of horror and revulsion many children feel for war make more than enough sense on an emotional level. Hence the massive adult effort to fix and soothe the children.

If we turn around what we think we're trying to tell children, we'll often hear what we want someone to tell us. "There's no danger to you. Someone will always love and take care of you." If only it were true. When we chase down children, corner them and deliver this message, so distorted by adult neediness, it can't be comforting.

No one's talking much about the Iraqi children. For them the sky really is raining death and destruction. I believe that our pilots are taking every effort to avoid civilian targets, but whether or not they were being aimed at is not likely to be an important question for the children who are hit.

Since they don't have a free press, it would be difficult to reach the Iraqi children even if we knew what to say. We could explain that their leader was a vile and dangerous man and that what was being done to them was in full concordance with the Geneva accords, but we'd have to leave off the stuff about no danger and always having someone to love and care for them.

I'm sure at least a few people will find my thoughts on American



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and Iraqi children and the gulf war unpatriotic. What I remember most about growing up with the war in Vietnam was everyone around me being sure it was wrong.

It would have been almost a sin to entertain the notion that maybe the war wasn't a mistake. I remember thinking that had I grown up differently surrounded by different people, I might have ended up just as sure that the war was a good and just one, and being glad that my circumstances had led me to correct rather than wrong thinking.

I remember writing people off and being written off and all the subtle and not so subtle signals we had for who was in what camp and not being able to play with so-and-so or being associated with twits of one sort or another and saying to myself, "Oh well, at least they're against the war." I don't want to go back there.

It's possible that this war will be America's finest hour and will bring a new world order, the benefits of which will dwarf the costs. It's possible that this war was utterly avoidable and will accomplish nothing worth accomplishing at staggering costs of both the calculable and incalculable variety.

While most Americans seem astoundingly clear on this war, we should at least be willing to admit the theoretical possibility that until the future happens we won't necessarily know what it will be.

I would like to propose the following truce. To support the gulf war does not endorse carnage, destruction and violence or mortgaging our children's future for a more secure supply of oil. To question the war does not mean that one is un-American or doesn't support the troops, or that one supports or underestimates the vile contemptibility of Saddam Hussein.

Let's also agree to be suspicious of those who tell us how crucially important it is whether or not we approve, support or oppose the war. The arguments seem not worth having, so let's at least be gentle with each other when we argue.

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