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Opinion

The War Begins

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From here, the sound of the war that began last night is inaudible. As veterans realize and almost every writer on the subject of war has reminded us, the experience of this new, unwanted war will be unknowable except among those who will be there for the fighting. The job of the soldiers, men and women alike, is transcendently clear. No one who knows the American military doubts that it will do its job to the best of its ability and with an unswerving consciousness of the balance between opportunity and risk. The lives wagered in this operation belong to young Americans and to Iraqis of all ages. Perhaps no military has ever known as well as this one how important it is to have a care for those lives.

Many Americans remember the first gulf war all too vividly, and the temptation will be to read this war against the backdrop of that one. The terrain is the same, but everything else has changed. A military that, even a dozen years ago, still found itself shuttling paper battle orders back and forth is now electronically linked and coordinated in ways that would have seemed unimaginable then. There is no strategic exit in the offing, as there was when the coalition forces stopped well short of Baghdad in 1991. Now it is Saddam or nothing. There is no sense of international coalescence, a mission that bound disparate nations together. This mission has unbound the world.

Our job here is not as transcendently clear as the soldiers' job. Now that the first strikes have begun, even those who vehemently opposed this war will find themselves in the strange position of hoping for just what the president they have opposed is himself hoping for: a quick, conclusive resolution fought as bloodlessly as possible. People who have supported Mr. Bush all along may feel tempted to try to silence those who voice dissent. It will be necessary to remind them that we are in this fight to bring freedom of speech to Iraq, not to smother it back home.

It would take a very set mind to judge what comes next on any ground but the success of the effort. If things go as well as we hope, even those who sharply disagree with the logic behind this war are likely to end up feeling reassured, almost against their will, by the successful projection of American power. Whether they felt the idea of war in Iraq was a bad one from the beginning, or -- like us -- they felt it should be undertaken only with broad international support, the yearning to go back to a time when we felt in control of our own destiny still runs strong. Of all the reasons for this mission, the unspoken one, deepest and most hopeless, is to erase Sept. 11 from our hearts.

This is now, as Mr. Bush has said repeatedly, a war with two missions: disarming Iraq and then transforming it into a free and hopeful society. That second goal is also an end everyone would like to see. Yet as a nation we have scarcely begun to talk about how it should be accomplished. Even as we sit here at home, worrying about the outcome of the fighting, we must start to debate what comes next.

That public discussion has to start soon, even tomorrow. But for now, all our other thoughts have come to rest. We simply hope for the welfare of those men and women -- sons and daughters -- who will be flinging themselves into the Iraqi desert.

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