



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

It's Not War **by Sheldon Richman**

Last weekend I watched my daughter Emily perform in a play about women who replaced men in factory jobs during World War II. The theme of “American Rosies” is that the war was such a dominant fact of life that these women were determined to participate. Going to work making military equipment was their best opportunity. The characters spoke of the disruption of normal life, typified by separation from their husbands and the rationing of food, gasoline, and other consumer goods. The war was topic No. 1, and everything else took a back seat.

This got me wondering why things are so different today. We are said to be not just in a war, but At War. President Bush tells us that in the “war on terror” our very civilization is at stake. “The war on terror is more than a military conflict — it is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century. And we’re only in its opening stages,” Bush said in his September 7 speech in Atlanta.

“Decisive ideological conflict”? That means a showdown in which only one side will be standing at the end. Indeed, some Bush supporters have dubbed the conflict World War III. The contrived term “Islamofascism” is designed to reinforce this view.

The president has tried hard to sell this theme since 9/11. Consistent with this, he calls himself a “war president” and has claimed extraordinary powers, such as the power to declare anyone an “unlawful enemy combatant,” hold such a person indefinitely, torture him, and suspend habeas corpus for noncitizens. Judging by all this, one might certainly think that for the foreseeable future American society is in a fight for its life.

But if one views American life more broadly, one sees a dramatic disconnect with Bush’s words and assertions of power. America doesn’t feel like it’s under siege. “Everything” hasn’t changed since 9/11. When he’s not stoking the war rhetoric, Bush — inconsistently — is telling us to go about our normal lives. And that is quite easy to do. We are issued no ration tickets. There is no military draft. And no special wartime restrictions hamper our movement or other activities. For now at least, we can speak our minds even in dissent.

So are we At War or not? The answer is no, certainly not in the way Bush means it. Other commentators have noticed the disconnect, but most of them have gone on to urge Bush to demand sacrifices from the American people, such as higher taxes. Some even call for a draft, which would end all pretense that we live in a free society.

In contrast, I think the disconnect demonstrates that the apocalyptic War is a fiction. What danger exists grows out of resentment against years of U.S. intervention in the Middle East, not a desire to destroy American society. A noninterventionist foreign policy could reduce that danger. But the rulers won't abandon interventionism. Too many political and economic interests are at stake.

Bush must know that what he says about the conflict is not true. There is no other way to explain why he has not asked for "sacrifices." He realizes that if he imposes sacrifices, the fragile support for his "war on terror" will evaporate. He once enjoyed support for his war in Iraq, but that vanished as mounting casualties and increasing violence produced a sense of quagmire.

America is not under siege. There is no threat to its integrity as a society. No barbarians stand at the gates ready to overrun and subjugate us. What we call terrorism is not war, but criminal action. It becomes war only if we make it so. But war exacts a terrible cost on the country that prosecutes it. If you need proof, see the Military Commissions Act of 2006.

*Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation, author of **Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State**, and editor of [The Freeman](#) magazine. Visit his blog "Free Association" at www.sheldonrichman.com.*

This article was originally published in October 2006.