

Nurses, Duty, and War

Supporting our troops, protecting our patients.

Is opposition to the war in Iraq necessary to be a good nurse? Geraldine Gorman, PhD, RN, suggested as much in two *AJN Viewpoint* columns (January 2005 and January 2007), which asserted that nurses have a professional duty to oppose the war in Iraq—and all wars—under the International Council of Nurses (ICN) position statement *Armed Conflict: Nursing's Perspective*. I wholly disagree. Your profession shouldn't require your support or opposition to the war, whether you are a nurse, a teacher, or an accountant.

Americans, in general, oppose the slaughter of civilians and gross human rights violations, such as those committed by the late Saddam Hussein, that in my opinion contributed to this war. The war has become a political dilemma. Many people agree that it has not been prosecuted with the greatest efficiency. Popular support is ebbing: 59% of Americans favor withdrawal of most U.S. troops by September 2008, as proposed by the U.S. House of Representatives, according to a CBS news poll as reported on their Web site March 28. Others, however, continue to see this war as the deciding battle between the forces of terror and our American way of life.

My view is the latter. I consider the ICN position that nurses must “strongly [oppose] armed conflict under any circumstances” to be pacifist nonsense. It suggests that the United States was wrong to wage war against Japan after being bru-



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tally attacked or against the Germans who sought world domination in World War II. It demeans the sacrifices made by our soldiers to protect our freedom. And it demeans the intelligence of nurses to suggest that we are incapable of deciding on our own whether a conflict is justifiable.

Nursing is the most trusted profession, according to Gallup's annual “honesty and ethics” poll. This is not because we're pacifists but because we stay above the political fray, treating the sick and injured regardless of their race, religion, or politics. It can be ethically perilous for a profession to take sides on some political issues. Suppose nurses as a group were to demand the immediate withdrawal of our troops from Iraq. Some experts predict such a withdrawal could lead to even greater loss of life

through civil war and reprisal killings. Would nurses be responsible for these deadly consequences? Consider also our colleagues deployed in Iraq with the U.S. military. They're risking their lives to alleviate the suffering of both Americans and Iraqis.

It is true that more than 3,200 Americans and according to a study published in the *Lancet* in October 2006 more than 600,000 Iraqis are estimated to have died in this war. I honor those brave military personnel who have died and regret the loss of innocent civilian lives, but we must remember that other wars have also taken a terrible human toll to preserve freedom. The Battle of Iwo Jima cost around 6,000 American lives in just 36 days. The Civil War claimed more than 200,000 Union and Confederate soldiers in combat (not including disease and other causes). As for civilian deaths in Iraq, they're not solely the result of “American bullets,” as Ms. Gorman implies; most are from suicide bombings and other sectarian violence.

Ms. Gorman, you are free to picket on Damen Avenue in Chicago. That is a freedom won and preserved through war. But do it simply as an American. Do not claim that all nurses have a duty to support your antiwar efforts. Our professional duty is to provide unbiased care. Beyond that, we're entitled to our own opinions. For that reason, I, and many other nurses like me, will not be joining your picket line. ▼

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