

# The Health of the Americans

By Paolo von Schirach

August 30, 2007

**WASHINGTON** – Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, for the moment a second tier candidate for the republican presidential nomination, warns about obesity in America and the health and economic damages that it causes. A former obese himself, he talks with the passion and credibility of the reformed food addict. Recently he proclaimed the obesity epidemic to be so widespread that, according to recent statistics, 61 per cent of US active duty troops are overweight. So even those who arguably should be fit and combat ready are somewhat impaired by excess weight. Other recently released statistics indicate that obesity has increased, with special incidence in many southern states. Most alarmingly, children are increasingly overweight and obese.

The ill effects of obesity, for the individual and for society, are well documented. This is a public health crisis with significant economic consequences (increased medical costs, lost productivity due to debilitating ailments) according to many studies and projections. And yet, while talked about, this issue has not acquired the character of urgency that it deserves. And this is the country that is arguably one of the world leaders in medical research and epidemiology.

True, the subject is not totally ignored, but the effort made to educate the public is modest; its impact –as the ravaging obesity epidemic shows– insignificant. While there are here and there messages aimed at fostering a healthier lifestyle, contrast them with the systematic bombardment of publicity for drugs/devices aimed at helping people cope with chronic ailments *caused by obesity* that could be prevented, at least

in many cases.

For instance, in the last couple of years, there has been an explosion of TV commercials about more and more sophisticated blood testing devices for diabetics. The individuals featured in these commercial are often overweight. The millions of overweight people who have developed diabetes –largely on account of obesity due to bad diet– may be delighted in learning that their annoying glucose checking routine may have become less invasive, due to refinements in technology. Medical technology companies, in turn, must be extremely happy in the growth of the population of diabetics. Their market grows and sales will soar.

But is there an equivalent amount of public health messages in the airwaves aimed at explaining to the public how drastic life style changes may go a long way in preventing/eliminating diabetes and thus the attendant need to monitor blood sugar levels? Certainly the device makers are not going to advertise the benefit of preventative actions that may reduce their customer base. So who will?

From a libertarian stand point, there should be no public authority nannies telling people what to do about their personal habits. The individual has freedom of choice. If people want to overeat, let them do so and face the health consequences of obesity later in life. But we know that it is not so. When a problem reaches these dimensions, its costs are shared in terms of overcrowded medical facilities and increased insurance premiums for all. Besides, the contemplation of such a huge self inflicted wound in terms of waste of human potential in one of the richest nations on earth should invite some reflection. And then there is the added problem of children who, lacking the maturity to know any better, tend to follow the example of their obese elders. Thus they develop early on bad habits that it will be difficult to shed later in life, even with a good dose of will power.

What is suggested here is not coercion to force people to change their life styles. But there is a need for a deliberate, multi year, sophisticated campaign aimed at providing the scientific evidence of what can and will go wrong with bad nutrition and lack of exercise. At the same time, as a matter of urgent remedial action, public authorities should immediately modify all nutrition programs delivered through the school systems and other venues so that only healthy food is offered to children. There is some movement in this direction.

A much more daunting and complex task, extremely difficult to craft, but crucial for future success, is an education system that would help people discover for themselves the value of "well being" as a life goal.

Given the seriousness of this predicament, it is astonishing that progress across the board is so slow. In the case of policies aimed at school children, it is largely dependent on the vigor and decisiveness of individual administrators. The scientific community knows what needs to be done and the urgency of the problem. America's political leaders know this. And yet, with the exception of former governor Huckabee mentioned above and California's governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, (a former body builder), who has engaged in a statewide campaign to promote more exercise and better school meals, this is not a hot topic in the United States.

As a minimum, a simple question comes to mind: what good does it do for America to have some of the most sophisticated public health research institutions and medical care delivery system in the world, if we are unable to reverse this massive epidemic that clearly points to a reduction in quality of life and life expectancy for millions, with an even worse future projected for the younger generations?

While there may be multiple factors that contribute to this disappointing picture, it would appear that the concept of

public health in the US is not conceptually and practically tied to prophylaxes and to a complete understanding of what "well being" and how it should be promoted in order to help people discover its immense value. About public health, there seems to be a dominant compartmentalized approach that could be summarized as "until you can function reasonably well, you are OK; when you are sick, you go see a doctor, (if you can afford one) and he'll fix whatever is wrong with you".

The world class state of the art medical facilities (and the attendant accumulated scientific knowledge) are there to fix problems *after* they have manifested themselves. And, in many instances, they can do this extremely well, especially when direct intervention is the most logical answer. And this is attested, for instance, by more and more sophisticated surgical techniques. But, while surgery can be a life saver in many situations, a system that is geared primarily towards fixing the consequences of problems is not really helping people as it could.

Besides, it is neither smart nor cost effective. It looks at people only after they have become patients; in the same way as the fire brigade intervenes only if there is a fire; or the police is called upon after a crime has been committed. When there is an ailment there is a diagnosis and, if possible, a cure. From this perspective, the doctor is mostly a mechanic who is called upon if and when a problem manifests itself. (Actually auto mechanics can be more proactive. My mechanic sends me notices reminding me that it has been so many months since my car has had a tune up. I have *never* received a note from my physician reminding me about the need to have a periodical physical or even the tests that are now routinely recommended for people beyond a certain age, such as a colonoscopy).

Of course, this is a deliberate exaggeration. Indeed, there are many programs aimed at preventing some diseases, like breast cancer for women, based on frequent screening of people

who appear healthy but may not be; as an invisible, not yet symptomatic, ailment, may be underway. The highly publicized campaign against smoking is another example. But these are *ad hoc* measures founded on the enormous publicity created around one or another particular ailment or issue by organized pressure groups.

Overall, there is no systematic effort aimed at educating people as to the psychological as well as physical advantages of a well balanced life; a life that would include healthy habits, including exercise of body and mind and good nutrition. And this should not be done in the name of hygiene, just because "it is good for you"; but because it is a worthy objective aimed at making life truly enjoyable.

But, beyond small circles of specialists, there is no debate as to why people seem to have such a hard time in discovering for themselves the positive consequences of healthy habits that would prevent something like the current obesity epidemic.

At the very best, we have some experts discussing the advantages of good habits in terms of prevention, But here the paramount objective is not an interest in the well being of the human person. The concern is primarily economic. Look at how much money, how many precious resources could be saved if people had good habits that would keep them healthy and so they would not need so much medical care. Clearly it is more cost effective to encourage healthy habits in the general population and to test people so that diseases can be caught early, as opposed to allowing the growth of degenerative diseases and wait until people require care and hospitalization thus causing much higher costs. Prevention is of course good; but, even if built into the system (and it is not), it would not capture the whole extent of the problem: that is a lack of interest in the complete well being of the human person.

And here we come to a gigantic paradox. It would appear that, in America, the collective understanding of the famous Jeffersonian “pursuit of happiness” that all people supposedly strive to attain—and that can take place in a condition of liberty— has been squeezed into the narrow confines of economic pursuits. Sure, economic prosperity is essential, for without it individual and societal choices are constrained.

But prosperity is a means to an end. The end should be a balanced person, enjoying a state of well being. There is a strident contradiction between people whose industry produces an overall prosperous country and an increasing proportion of the same people who produce prosperity engaging in what amounts to be self destructive personal habits that ultimately jeopardize the enjoyment of happiness. That very happiness whose free pursuit is made possible by the complex institutional machinery that we have created to protect it and uphold it.

If indeed a great deal of the wealth produced through assiduous work and the exercise of human ingenuity by the Americans is devoted to engage in personal unhealthy habits that inevitably increase diseases, diminish the quality of life, while shortening it, making people *less happy* in the process, one should really wonder what the point of all this is.

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# How To Attack Urban Traffic Congestion

By Paolo von Schirach

August 23, 2007

**WASHINGTON** – Mayor Michael Bloomberg is probably going to succeed in creating a congestion charge for motor vehicles in New York City, following the reasonably successful example of London. This way, Manhattan's chronic congestion will be somewhat eased. The overall plan includes some upgrades in mass transit, so that reasonably convenient and affordable alternatives to the private automobile will be available to those who do not wish to pay the congestion charge.

This is of course a good idea. What is astonishing is that it is taking so long for administrators and citizens in urban areas –not just in America, Europe or other developed countries, but all over the world– to realize that there is no way to ease traffic congestion with its attendant costs in terms of wasted time, lost productivity, pollution and enhanced stress for millions of people, unless the use of the private automobile is either banned or significantly restricted and alternatives based on mass transit solutions introduced.

This looks like a no-brainer. And yet, these timid first steps notwithstanding, the reality is that the whole world considers the private automobile as the affirmation of attained affluence and as the primary means that grants more and more people “freedom of movement”, the unhindered opportunity to go wherever they want, whenever they want.

But, at least as far as the joy of personal mobility is concerned, it is obvious that the opposite is true. The private car has become the primary *obstacle* to getting around freely; for the simple reason that too many of us want to exercise the right to get around at the same time; while the space available cannot grow in step with the increased demand for roads and parking. This is painfully obvious all over the world, from Bangalore to Paris, From Washington DC, to Maputo. In fact, increased affluence and consequent car affordability in many developing countries is making the problem worse every day. No need to recite hundreds of well known examples of

gigantic traffic jams, increased levels of smog and longer and longer commutes.

To solve this mess we have to break away from the conception that most people all over the world have about cars as symbols of personal achievement and as the primary tools with which they can exercise their mobility needs in urban areas. This model is not working. More and more private cars on the road equal diminishing returns for all users.

Needless to say, people do need to get around with reasonable ease and comfort. The main reason why the car, notwithstanding all the growing disadvantages, still reigns is that the alternatives to the privately owned and operated vehicle appear unappealing or unaffordable. The construction of fast underground rail transportation systems looks good and neat, in principle. But, in practice, they are horribly expensive to build and quite expensive to operate and maintain.

Bus systems are generally inadequate. The supply is limited, while buses travel at the speed of the rest of the surface traffic. For these reasons, many people consider that, if they need to be stuck in traffic after waiting for a bus that comes late and usually does not take them to their final destination, they may as well drive their own car. Indeed, with few exceptions, the bus is an inadequate, somewhat inconvenient, system used mostly by the less affluent who cannot afford a car.

So, we seem to be stuck with the current predicament, unless the controversial approach taken by London, New York and others based on actively discouraging private driving through a tax becomes acceptable in most cities around the world. Of course, the promise of the congestion tax is that, with fewer private cars driving around, the speed and reliability of surface mass transit, mostly bus services, will increase. Better bus service should provide a further incentive for



people to leave the car at home and use public transportation. We shall see how New Yorkers will respond overtime to this carrot and stick scheme.

And we could do more than this. There are examples of successful experimentation with new ways to conceive mobility in urban areas. But it is astonishing that the few good, proven, examples have not yet become mainstream. For example, only technical experts and urban planners know well the process that led the city of Curitiba, capital of the state of Parana, in southern Brazil, to develop what is probably one of the best examples of a reliable, bus based, rapid transit system. (With the emphasis on "rapid"). The municipality, overtime, (and after a great deal of trial and error), managed to create and refine a public surface transit system that has the advantages of a seamless underground rail network without the costs. This was achieved through the creation of dedicated bus lanes and a good system of feeder lines and practical interconnections.

In cities that are already built it is probably next to impossible to add new dedicated bus lanes and squeeze them in the existing heavily used roads. In order to make space for bus lanes, at least in many areas, the private car would have to be restricted or banned. And one can begin to hear the howling and the protests of those who feel that their basic human rights would be denied by such drastic prohibitions.

But imagine, if you can, a seamless system of buses that one can board from everywhere within a city and from the suburbs (parking the car at the bus station; in the same way as many park it at the underground metro station) that would be frequent, fast (no more traffic jams) and reliable. This is not inconceivable and not prohibitively expensive. The Curitiba example is there to be looked at and studied by all. (A few cities in Latin America have followed suit).

Unless we are masochistically attached to our suffering in

traffic jams and to longer and longer commutes that cost more and more in human, environmental as well as economic terms, it is time to look at the good examples set by others and see how we can develop more sensible and more effective ways of getting around in urban areas. This is not just about practicality and efficiency. It is a major step that will help us in making cities places of enjoyable experience; not urban hells that people want to escape from as soon as they can.

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# The swamp was not drained

by Paolo von Schirach

August 14, 2007

**WASHINGTON** – Early on, at the beginning of the campaign against al Quaida and affiliates the US Government proclaimed that America would proceed to “drain the swamp”. This radically methodical approach vis-à-vis Osama and his followers would give us victory against this elusive enemy. The metaphor is self-evident: deprive the terrorists of their natural habitat and supporting systems. The swamp creatures, relying on the protection provided by this murky environment, once the swamp had been drained, would be exposed, vulnerable, weaker and thus easily captured or killed.

The problem is that the swamp to be drained was huge; in fact nothing less than most of the Muslim countries and beyond. The Islamic terrorists and affiliated entities found and find shelter, help, assistance and support within various segments of the Islamic world that could not be easily isolated, surrounded by a security fence and then “drained”, thus yielding our quarry. Furthermore, as it turned out, many radicals managed to disguise themselves as legitimate citizens

and or immigrants/visitors in many non Muslim countries. If these were and are the swamps in which the terrorists hide, they have not been drained. Whatever successes have been obtained against radicals willing to engage in terrorism, they were achieved through fishing them out of the swamps, because of improved fishing (that is: intelligence) techniques.

True, the radicals have lost the most egregious form of open support that was provided by the Taliban regime prior to 9/11. The Taliban openly and defiantly affirmed that bin Laden was a friend and a guest in Afghanistan. Thus they would not hand him over to America to be prosecuted as the mastermind of the plot leading to the attacks on the US. This adamant behavior provided a good justification for invading, rather than just draining, that particular swamp.

After the initial defeat of the Taliban regime, while many swamp creatures were indeed captured or killed, bin Laden and associates managed to escape and go into hiding elsewhere. Which is to say, they found another, more remote, swamp; most likely across the border in Pakistan. For the time being, because of well known ethnic and religious issues faced by the Pakistani government in the North West of the country, we seem to be unable to drain this swamp.

The notion that one could quickly deprive the terrorists of the environment that provided logistical and financial support as well as fresh recruits proved to be too optimistic; or perhaps just simplistic. Whatever real cooperation may come from governments and intelligence services in various countries, there are significant segments of the societies that support the radicals' cause. Whatever the efforts aimed at blocking financing via Islamic charities or other sources, there seem to be enough funds to fuel terror plots around the world; while the widespread approval of the cause pursued by the terrorists by large segments of public opinion in many countries, so far has guaranteed a steady flow of new recruits, quite willing to die for the cause, just like the

September 11 hijackers. The swamp is alive and well.

A successful "draining of the swamp" should have resulted in obtaining a convinced rejection of radicalism by all Muslim societies. This would have resulted in ostracizing and isolating the fanatics who, without support and friends, would have become weaker and incapable of engaging in grand plans. Well, this has not quite happened yet. In truth, recent opinion polls taken in Muslim countries would indicate a noticeable drop in popular support for the ideology and methods of radical groups; and this is good in so far as these results may be the harbingers of a major future shift away from radicalism and its prophets. But there is still enough residual support for radicalism and terrorism as a legitimate method to advance a cause that many find appealing. This indicates that the swamp has been not been drained.

In parallel with the "draining" methodology, the US embarked in another grandiose plan. And this is the equivalent of moving all Muslim societies from the swamp that does support radicalism to the dry and fertile land of democracy that will be immune from it. The logic is still the same; but the plan much more complex and ambitious. While draining the swamp emphasized depriving the terrorists of their ecosystem, the democracy building plan was and is aimed *at creating an entirely new ecosystem* in which radicalism and its attendant terrorist methods to force onto others the acceptance of its version of a good society could not take root.

In principle this is correct. In new democratic societies that would recognize and affirm popular sovereignty and individual rights, peaceful political dialogue would replace political violence. Historical precedent, according to some, would vindicate the validity of this approach. The undemocratic Germans and Japanese were taught how to adopt and follow democratic principles by the US occupiers who believed that the creation of constitutional democracies would be the best way to inoculate these nations against the perils of recurring

totalitarian temptations. Indeed.

The difference between then and now is, however, enormous. The Germans and the Japanese had formally surrendered and nobody at the time seriously contemplated resisting the Allied occupation. The adoption of new forms of government thus was not strongly resisted by the vanquished societies. Even the skeptics within them agreed that, if nothing else, if the adoption of democratic institutions was the price to be paid in order to regain legitimacy within the international political systems, it was a price worth paying.

In today's broader Middle East the picture is entirely different. First of all total victory has yet to be achieved both in Afghanistan and in Iraq. The western model is actively resisted. Furthermore, beyond places where there is fighting, the western democratic model, founded on individual rights and responsibilities does not seem to sit well with societies molded by the notion of group loyalty, still driven by various forms of tribalism in which chaos among warring factions is averted through one form or another of repression or authoritarianism. (Remember Saddam Hussein?)

In the long run, the swamp may be drained and in the longer run the weak seedlings of democracy may take root. And maybe later on the world will recognize that there was some value in the unrealistic effort made by the naïve (or hubristic, take your pick) Americans in trying to force feed a new political philosophy and new sets of principles on reluctant and quite unprepared societies. Maybe future historians will conclude that, while not immediately successful, the talk of democracy inspired some who, later on, made it their genuinely felt cause.

But whatever the judgment of history, this is a long term plan. In the meantime, we are confronted with the daunting task of convincing people in societies in the midst of identity crises, (or alienated, unassimilated groups living in

western societies), that peaceful methods are more effective than political violence and that the paranoid search of external enemies (that is us) is a futile enterprise. They shall have to be convinced that their tactical successes (9/11, Bali, Madrid and London bombings, among others), however spectacular, will never bring about the liberating transformation that the radicals are dreaming about.

Until we will find better ways to make its ideology unappealing, Islamic fanaticism with its Holy War component, conducted through (legitimate, according to them) terrorist actions, will remain a major threat; given the incredibly high level of damage that terror attacks engineered by relatively few people can cause.

This violent extremism originates mostly in the inability of a number of traditionally Muslim societies to first accept modernity and then find and pursue their own more harmonious path towards it. The retreat into a distorted but reassuring medieval orthodoxy is their way to rediscover and reaffirm moral clarity and a sense of meaning and direction in an otherwise puzzling and, for some at least, threatening world. An outside world that (according to them) is deliberately trying to oppress them. In their fight for purity these various radicals have constructed an oversimplified and totally demonized vision of politics. A significant feature of this fantastic worldview is in identifying the West as the main obstacle for pious Muslims on their way to establish anew organically orthodox societies, finally compliant with God given moral principles.

This ideology, as divorced from reality as it may be, presents a huge problem for us, the target of this intense animosity. In our attempt to counter, degrade and eventually neutralize this threat, we have to fight on two fronts: against the individuals who become actively involved; and, probably even more crucial, against the appeal of a distorted, but widely popular way of thinking that creates a steady stream of new

recruits quite willing to die for the cause.

“Draining the swamp” and “democracy building” may have appeared good ways to achieve the ultimate objective of transforming the political culture of these societies. But this “mechanistic” approach did not take into account the enormous complexities involved in radically transforming traditional societies, with the attendant negative byproducts of being identified even more than before as oppressors and enemies. Judging by the results of many polls, the US, if anything, is a great deal less popular around the world than before embarking in these efforts.

The task of convincing people to abandon political violence and terrorist methods and adopt peaceful methods compatible with modern political systems is extremely complex. Radical solutions to eliminate this virus, theoretically appealing but in practice not workable, have not produced the intended results.

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# **Iraq is not about fighting terrorism**

by Paolo von Schirach

August 2, 2007

**WASHINGTON** – Not knowing exactly what kind of problem one is dealing with does not help in devising the best way to resolve it. The worst aspect of the present American predicament characterized by the interminable bleeding in Iraq and the ongoing fight against terrorist groups inspired by Islamic radicalism is in the inability or unwillingness on the part of

the administration to correctly and properly describe to America and to the world that we are involved in two qualitatively different fights. Iraq and the fight against terror are separate problems that require different methods and different solutions. They are not one and the same thing, as it has been claimed all along.

However late it may be, America should come to terms with reality and say that the mess in Iraq, strong al Qaeda's presence there notwithstanding, is not the main theater in the conflict against Islamic fundamentalism. Frankly it never was. By the same token, even assuming complete pacification in Iraq, including the destruction of al Qaeda in Iraq, we shall still have to deal with all the other Islamic terrorists spread around the world. So, the White House should stop saying that Iraq is the main theater in the war against Islamic fundamentalism. The imported radicals, the real instigators of al Qaeda in Iraq, constitute a major added complication in this conflict.

However, they are not the main drivers of what has emerged as a sectarian conflict. Granted, al Qaeda thrives in this conflict. It has done its best to deepen it. But, looking at Iraq in context, we see what has always been an artificial state now torn by powerful centrifugal forces. These forces have been unleashed by the trauma and ensuing chaos brought about by a poorly planned US invasion.

The idea of a strong connection between Saddam and terrorism, (documented by some instances of support for terrorists groups by the dictatorship), was trumpeted before the invasion as a handy (in the jumpy post 9/11 psychological climate) justification to get rid of Saddam Hussein. But now that we know that none of this was true, we should stop misrepresenting the attempt to pacify Iraq as part as a crucial chapter in the "war on terror".

We know what was said (and maybe believed) at the time. The



invasion of Iraq of 2003 was aimed at preventing, (so it was said at the time), the potential collusion between a dictator who supposedly had (we thought then) weapons of mass destruction, WMDs, and terrorists who might have used those weapons against us. A potential, although sketchy, doomsday scenario from possibility graduated to a certainty. It was labelled an imminent danger that required immediate, drastic action via "regime change."

The affirmation that Saddam, the friend of the terrorists, had to be removed to prevent WMDs from falling into the wrong hands might have been tenable at the very beginning, when there was almost unanimous certainty that the fall of the regime would have yielded stockpiles of WMDs and plenty of documentary evidence of strong ties between Saddam and terrorist groups. But when, very early in the game, when it became obvious to all that this was not the case, it was incumbent on the administration to quickly admit its mistake. It should have changed focus and tone and proclaim to the world that –even without the Saddam-terrorists connection– the liberation of Iraq from its dictator was still a worthwhile endeavor and that the international community could take a large role in aiding the Iraqis to find a better, hopefully more just, future.

But this did not happen. Instead, the arrival of al Qaeda in Iraq, along with assorted foreign fighters, made possible by the post invasion chaos, gave the administration the wonderful opportunity to square the circle. The White House could say that the strong presence of al Qaeda in Iraq, along with documents showing the strategic relevance of the fight in Iraq in al Qaeda's new masterplan, proved conclusively what had been said all along by the administration: ***"The invasion of Iraq was absolutely necessary in the ongoing fight against terrorism"***. This is either cinically disingenuous manipulation, or the result of being blindsided by one's own rigid preconceptions.

By insisting that Iraq is mostly about the al Qaeda brand of terrorism, (terrorist methods are used also in the ongoing brutal sectarian violence), the administration has created its own reality that is not supported by the facts. This inability or unwillingness to admit error has created deep divisions at home and abroad. The consequences of the confusion created by the mislabeling of the conflict in Iraq are visible in the acrimonious debates began by those who would like us to leave, precisely because they see the conflict as primarily internal sectarian strife, not truly tied to the larger issue of our global fight against fundamentalism.

It is a serious matter when policy positions result from totally different definitions of the facts on the ground. It would appear that proponents and opponents of withdrawal are looking at different countries. The confused political debate in Washington is in large part the outcome of confused analysis. And the administration, being in charge of all policies, should have the primary responsibility to provide an accurate assessment of the dynamics on the ground.

Indeed, while al Qaeda is indeed there and needs to be dealt with, the primary mission in Iraq is to pacify a country torn by sectarian violence. Even assuming total victory against al Qaeda in Iraq, Iraq's problems would not be settled. Whereas, in the administration's rhetoric, there are constant pronouncements about Iraq as the key theater in the "war on terror" (i.e. the ongoing struggle to degrade transnational cells of radical ideologues who claim to follow a strict interpretation of Islam).

This clearly misrepresents the broader scenario of a diffuse threat coming from a transnational movement of violent radicals residing in various countries, willing and maybe capable to plot more attack against the US. Whatever happens in Iraq, this threat will continue and we shall have to deal with it.

Whereas, in trying to shore up support for the continuing commitment in Iraq, the administration repeats *ad nauseam* that “we fight them there so that we do not have to fight them here”. Now, in light of the above, this idea is highly questionable, if not entirely silly. This notion implies that all or most our terrorist enemies are currently in Iraq. Thus, as long as they are engaged in combat against our troops, they cannot mount a threat against the US mainland. But, although it is true that since 9/11 we have not been attacked, it cannot be proven that this is because we are fighting the terrorists in Iraq.

Indeed, the fact that we have not suffered another attack since 9/11 in no way demonstrates that the Iraq engagement has prevented anything new to happen. Unfortunately, we do know that it takes only a handful of determined individuals willing to engage in suicide missions to bring about a great deal of damage in the US mainland. This is after all what we learnt from 9/11 and similar plots and attacks in other countries. So, the notion that, “as long as we keep them all pinned down in Iraq, we are safe here at home”, is preposterous. No doubt, we are engaging some dangerous radicals in Iraq; but there are plenty more around the world, as many attacks against targets in Europe and elsewhere have proven.

This notion of “bringing the fight to them so that they do not bring it to us” would be dubious even in the case that the fight in Iraq were indeed all about al Qaeda and affiliates. But it is even more implausible, as this is not the case. As we know, official rhetoric notwithstanding, US forces in Iraq have multiple missions. The key one right now, (whatever the chances of eventual success), is about reducing sectarian violence. This is what they are trying to accomplish. Iraq is now mostly a civil war, with al Qaeda –granted– playing a significant, disruptive role. But this conflict is by no means primarily about al Qaeda. As this is obvious to almost everybody, it would do the country and the world a lot of good

for the administration to stop affirming what is patently wrong.

Thus, it would help both national and international public opinion to state clearly that at this time we are dealing with two separate problems in the global arena: a) how to create a modicum of self-sustaining security in Iraq; b) how to prevent (through good intelligence, secret services and special forces) more terror attacks around the world, while defusing the appeal of Islamic radicalism that seems to be the incubator of almost all terrorist groups. Of course, in Iraq, there is some degree of overlap, at least in some areas. But, again, let us remember that we did not go into Iraq to fight al Qaeda. al Qaeda could get established in Iraq mostly thanks to the total collapse of order. It is not the expression of a strong, deeply rooted indigenous political culture grounded on Islamic fundamentalism.

(This does not mean, as most opponents of the invasion claim, that the war in Iraq is a really a horribly expensive distraction that has prevented us from focusing on the main threat. For this reason we should excuse ourselves and leave as soon as possible. Unfortunately, whatever the errors that have led us into Iraq, now that we have turned it upside down, before leaving we have to be very clear as to what is that we want to leave behind. Mistake or no mistake, until domestic Iraqi forces can reliably ensure a modicum of security and some kind of institutional viability, "we own" Iraq and we have a crucial responsibility for not making a bad situation worse both internally and externally).

So, let us establish some distinctions between the broad strategic issue of Islamic fanaticism and how to recreate security in Iraq after the mess we created by removing a dictator who, whatever his horrible methods, certainly had found a way to enforce a brutal order.

This may not help much in the short term; but no doubt a

correct definition of the problem we are facing is a precondition for the elaboration of relevant solutions. So, however late it may be, let's at least establish correctly what we are dealing with and have a debate based on facts rather than slogans.