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## Sport and war don't mix

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
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The Army-Navy football game this year opened when the President of the United States tossed a coin brought in from Fallujah for the ceremony. Much to my surprise there was little comment on the coin, or the story of what led to it being chosen for such an honor. Clearly what we have here is another mixing of the idols of war and the idols of the playing field, a potent mix in many quarters. Teddy Roosevelt found football appealing as a candidate to serve as James' "Moral Equivalent of War," as have many others over the past century. He would have liked the touch of having a coin from Fallujah.

I must say that I still find it impossible to draw a precise connection between military action and sport as commensurate human endeavors. The connection has been made for quite some time now, although the connection is more often than not displayed by a convergence of militant patriotism and sport. The playing of the national anthem before sporting events has been a practice going back to the time before the Star Spangled Banner was the national anthem. Baseball in particular has tried to associate itself with patriotism and democracy, both in time of peace and time the time of war, ever since baseball's leaders first made the claim that it was the National Pastime.

Connections have repeatedly been drawn between physical and mental development through sport, and physical and mental readiness for military action. The British talked of having won its great battles on the playing fields of Eton. Football in America has long been described in military vocabulary replete with military metaphors. The physical training regimens of World War II stressed sporting activity for both physical and mental training with football and wrestling held to be most useful. Descriptions of the athlete as warrior have been common enough through the years.

More obvious and more public have been the patriotic displays put on by sports organizations which no doubt have a mix of motives from the idealistic and patriotic to the cynical. One is drawn to such displays as the use of a flag the size of New Jersey at NFL games. This is punctuated by the fly over of military aircraft coinciding with the last note of the national

anthem, something that produces a powerful rush of emotion in the crowd.

In point of fact few sporting events escape the attention of the patriots as an opportunity to promote a foreign policy and military agenda whose wisdom is in question. The Vietnam Era was saturated with this motif. The upcoming Super Bowl promises to be another orgy of emotional manipulation designed to promote the war agenda of George W. Bush although that will be subtext to the phrases, "Support the troops" and "protecting freedom."

It was about a month ago that I was watching a college basketball game from Louisville. The Cardinal was involved in one of those classic intrastate rivalry games that often produce excellent basketball amidst high emotions. This game did not disappoint in that respect, as it was filled with high drama engendered by a major comeback. What stayed with me from the telecast was not the game itself, or even the power of the atmosphere, but something more troubling.

One of the major features of the game was a video hookup by which, less than a week before Christmas, family members could meet with loved ones serving in Iraq in the American armed forces. Troops from Kentucky and Southern Indiana were gathered at two bases in Iraq to watch the UK-Louisville basketball game and have the opportunity for video communication with family members who attended the game. In all some thirty families enjoyed these fifteen-minute opportunities. It was a heartwarming experience for all involved and tears flowed across the smiling faces.

This program of video linkages is sponsored by Freedom Calls Foundation and each such event runs in the neighborhood of \$350,000 with costs paid by donations from individuals, from the networks such as ESPN in this case, and the Pentagon. Providing such an opportunity to families and relatives, and of course to the soldiers themselves, is certainly a worthy endeavor and one that I applaud.

To feature this endeavor within the body of an intercollegiate basketball game and telecast is not as obviously worthy. For those who oppose this war and mourn the continuing havoc it is wrecking upon Iraq as well as the sacrifice of American and Iraqi lives the worthiness seems remote. For those who regard the continuing war as a misbegotten adventure in foreign policy hubris or for those who doubt the wisdom of spending millions of dollars of day in Iraq, the staging of this event for television

seems a case of the cynical manipulation of raw emotion for the promotion of war.

It is one thing to express support for the troops, but quite another to manipulate the emotions of a national television audience. It is one thing to praise the troops for doing their job under difficult circumstances, and quite another for announcers and commentators to say that these men and women are involved in this war so that "we might be free." The latter proposition bears no relationship to this war in Iraq, its origins, or its purposes. Pumping up a war should not be in the job description of sports announcers and commentators.

The use of sport, especially intercollegiate sport, for the promotion of war is at best inappropriate and at worst immoral. It is a most troubling aspect associated with the entire patriotic fanfare at or during sporting events. It is a disturbing brand of voyeurism when the raw emotions of families are exploited on sports telecasts in support of this war of dubious origins and fading support.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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