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Cowboys, Caution and Courage

By [Farai Chideya](#), [Pop and Politics](#)

February 16, 2003

In a [floor speech](#) delivered Wednesday, Feb. 12, Senator Robert Byrd (D-West Virginia) questioned why the Senate was so "ominously, dreadfully silent" about debating a war that could change America's moral standing in the world.

"The doctrine of preemption – the idea that the United States or any other nation can legitimately attack a nation that is not imminently threatening but may be threatening in the future – is a radical new twist on the traditional idea of self defense," Sen. Byrd said. "It appears to be in contravention of international law and the UN Charter. And it is being tested at a time of world-wide terrorism, making many countries around the globe wonder if they will soon be on our – or some other nation's – hit list."

President George W. Bush has taken the cowboy imagery that flows from John Wayne to "Lethal Weapon" and repurposed it in public policy. The lone gunman may work against international terrorists in "Die Hard." But the American people do not support the government fighting terrorism alone, in ways that make us more isolate and vulnerable and arouse opposition from the international community.

Even the cowboy ethos rejects fights that are, as every 6-year-old on the playground would put it, "just not fair." Most Americans think that going into Iraq when the nation isn't a direct threat is just plain stupid. A new New York Times/CBS News poll found that 59 percent of Americans favor delaying plans for war while the U.N. continues inspections. An even higher number, 63 percent, said America should not go to war without the support of our allies.

This marks a clear division between the rhetoric of the administration – which has claimed it speaks on behalf of the American people – and the will of the people itself. Despite pervasive terror warnings, Americans are more concerned about the economy than they are about Iraq. "The economy" is shorthand for quality of life: children who need help learning, parents who need jobs, communities that need improved relations with police. With our deficits, there's little money to allocate. Dealing with these issues will require at least as much strength from our government as fighting terror.

Why has it taken so long to unearth the feelings of the general public? The

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media, notably chastised for ignoring early anti-war protests, hasn't looked for responses that challenge the war effort. War is flashy, brilliant and bright. It plays well on television. In fact, most of the networks have already invested hundreds of thousands, if not millions of dollars, in overseas staffing and infrastructure to cover the war-that-might-be. If it doesn't happen, it'll be a financial loss.

According to the International Herald Tribune, CNN has allocated \$30 to \$35 million for coverage of a new Iraq war. The big three networks could spend more. Financially, war is a double-edged sword for television outlets, which build their reputations and viewer bases but often lose ad dollars in the short run.

In the words of Mark Twain, "It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare." Right now, Americans are displaying the courage to challenge their own government's recklessness. War on Iraq has been reported as a done deal, but the emergence of a thoughtful response to this historic challenge is just building. It's not too late for our government and our media to follow the citizens' lead.

Farai Chideya is the founder of PopAndPolitics.com.

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