CENTER VALLEY – War has engulfed us! From round-the-clock images and non-stop coverage, to continuing protests and endless commentaries, the current military conflict in Iraq has become the primary, if not solitary, topic of our discussion. Embedded in our thought and our talk, however, is a worldview or mind-set that warrants further consideration. It seems that, as individuals and a nation, we are becoming increasingly skeptical.

This trend can be seen almost everywhere: from skeptical reaction to diplomatic speeches (which are only compelling if we assume our government officials do not err or ever mislead us), to skeptical analysis of military reports from the front (which never seem to convey bad news). It appears in sharp relief in speculations about the political motives for engaging in war at this time. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the op-ed piece by Gary Olson (The Morning Call, 3/27/03), in which he claims that “we’re witnessing the biggest natural resource grab in modern history” and that this war “is less about Iraq than enforcing global supremacy” or advancing other social and economic interests (e.g., “distracting our citizens from scandals”).

The veracity of such viewpoints is of less concern here than the presumptions underlying these and similar comments. While it may make for impassioned debate, skepticism muddies the mind and sullies the spirit.

Skepticism has long been a current of individual or social thought. Philosophically it gained strength particularly in French schools of thought in the 17th and 18th centuries, later to reach its zenith in the writings of the English philosopher David Hume. This viewpoint assumes that our reasoning ability suffers from internal contradictions. It concludes that many, if not all, claims to truth are not justifiable, that our knowledge can never be sure and certain.

Why have we become such skeptics? It may be that experience dictates this approach. Lives characterized by frustration, long-suffering, or tragedy lead almost inevitably to a jaded
perspective. More likely, skepticism results from a cultural mode of thought, in force in the
scientific and juridical realms that now dominate our lives. In these arenas, failure to provide
specific demonstration or concrete evidence necessarily renders any judgment unpersuasive.

In other words, our thinking about most things nowadays begins with the assumption of falsity.
We think that if something is not “proven” then it is not true. We presume that without public
knowledge of all the facts and details there is no justification for political action. We’ve become
mired in doubt. We are no longer able to believe.

Today this skeptical worldview reaches deep down and extends far and wide. Psychologically it
generates doubt as a starting point to our considerations. Sociologically it engenders a distrust of
institutions and authorities. Politically, it calls into question the very possibility of a good
society.

To question this trend toward skepticism is not to prefer a naive outlook on life. To be sure, we
need to be careful about our decisions and actions, particularly when these entail matters of life
and death. To decry skepticism is not to denounce critical thinking. Certainly we need to
challenge propositions, particularly in debatable issues. But careful attention displays prudence,
not defiance. Critical thought seeks greater clarity and better understanding, not the destruction
of sense or the denial of knowing.

In these troubled times, we would all benefit from thinking about thinking. The suppositions we
share speak to the values we hold. Ideas do have consequences, and our modes of thought make
us into who we are.

Historically, the world’s great religious traditions have always encouraged this introspection by
exhorting believers to practice an examination of conscience. This is especially true in sacred
seasons of the year, such as this time of Lent in which war is being waged.

Before adducing what are the motivations of others, be they political leaders or average citizens,
we would do well to consider our own worldviews, our own mind-sets, our own approaches to
life’s difficult questions. Do we assume the worst in people and question their every claim? Or
can we place trust in others and believe, absent contrary fact, that goodness and virtue can
prevail?

Public protests against war can be valid, as expressions of free speech. Support for our troops
and our leaders should not wane, as we band together in patriotic duty. But how we resolve the
conflict between skepticism and trust has implications for our world that are sure to outlast
military battles. When faith and culture are strangers, the common good of society itself is
threatened.

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