

Not in our backyard: Means and ends in Iraq

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Philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that it is always wrong to treat a person or a people purely as a means to an end. According to Kant, to say nothing of common moral sense, human beings are subjects and as such should never be treated as mere instruments or objects. And yet it seems that the U.S. is rather transparently using the people of Iraq as a means to the end of keeping the battle with the Osamas of the world off of our shores.

In his graduation address at the Naval Academy in May, President Bush came right out with his better-in-Baghdad-than-in-the-Beltway strategy. “We are,” he insisted, “taking the fight to the enemy abroad so we do not have to face them here at home.”

The metaphor that Bush strategists often resort to is this: it is better “to keep the ball in their court” than to have suicide bombers careening down Main Street.

Former national security adviser Richard Clarke recently called the “better there than here” strategy into question on pragmatic grounds. According to Clarke and many others, taking the battle to Baghdad has provided an enormous recruiting boon to al-Qaeda. And the war has also become a veritable training ground for our foes. Fighters who used to be ignorant about urban combat are fast becoming wily veterans.

The practical issues aside, the idea of fighting a war in someone else’s backyard so that we do not have to fight it in our own is in itself morally questionable.

Depending on the issue, politicians seem to acknowledge that people are not to be used as instruments. Not long ago, when Congress pondered the ethics of embryonic stem cell research, one of the arguments for limiting such research was that it is wrong to use even a potential human being as a means to an end.

And yet the “ball in their court” strategy entails treating the people of Iraq as a means to the end of our own quiet streets. It is as though when one’s neighborhood

is threatened with a great melee, one protects oneself by figuring out a way to stage the fight on someone else's property.

President Bush's singular accomplishment is that there have not been any terrorist attacks on American soil since 9/11. Bush has vowed to continue to fight terrorists in Iraq "so we do not have to face them here at home." The president explained, "When terrorists spend their days and nights struggling to avoid death or capture, they're less capable of arming and training and plotting new attacks on America." But this very same struggle has been a blight to the people who are hosting this struggle.

Moralists that we Americans take ourselves to be, let's be honest enough to ask: How much devastation are we permitted to visit on other people in order to keep the land of the free free from terrorists? We are out of moral bounds if we imagine that we are entitled to plow other lands into killing fields so long as we judge that to be in our national security interests.