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Ribbons

As formal rosettes, they adorn banks and post offices, even convenience stores. In single bands, they are wrapped around trees, radio aerials and telephone poles, and attached to everything from baby buggies to women's dresses.

Yellow ribbons were everywhere along the Carolinas' coast as Sharon and I drove from Beaufort to Beaufort, two towns with a common name in the neighboring states.

Separated by a series of beaches and sometime fishing communities, the Beauforts are, in these days of international crisis, joined by more than their shared name. Each acts as permanent host to adjoining Marine bases: South Carolina's Parris Island and North Carolina's Camp Lejeune and Cherry Point.

While much of America (and particularly its media) appears anxious for George Bush to order the Middle East bloodletting to begin, the Beauforts and their neighboring communities are filled with people praying for a peaceful resolution to the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait.

In a real sense, the yellow ribbons are merely the visible, constant symbols of the prayers by families and friends who have no doubt that the first American casualties would come from among their loved ones, members of the nation's most professional armed forces.

In relating the sentiment that dominates the region (as reflected in the local media), no implication should be inferred that there is any lack of patriotism.

As professionals, the service personnel are dedicated to the proposition that in these days of crisis they are doing exactly what they are paid for. Beyond pay, their feeling of honor and duty must be judged as no less dedicated than earlier generations who wore the uniform of this democracy.

However, while the ancient Romans may have believed "nothing is sweeter than dying for one's country," modern Americans know better.

In this time of awesome striking power, the best use of our military can be derived from employing its capability to deter aggression. If

forced to fight, the best tactic demands hurling our terrible weaponry at vital targets, looking for a quick knock-out blow.

But anyone who thinks Iraq can be finished off by mere missiles and bombs, however terrible, simply was paying no attention to its eight-year war against Iran. Both sides absorbed horrendous casualties before collapsing in a truce. Nobody won the war.

The secret of Iraq's perceived "victory" came from the fact that in the final years its army was fighting to protect its homes. Iran exhausted its greater resources and slaughtered an estimated million of its young men, in human waves of attacks.

As the yellow ribbon wearers know, instinctively if no other way, sending their loved ones against Iraq would invite a blood-letting that no one should be willing to accept. Not in this republic.

If Americans must die in future wars, their deaths can only be accepted when the nation is defending international peace, as it is now in Saudi Arabia.

Ordering an invasion of Iraq, on whatever justification, would make George Bush no better than Saddam

Hussein, who, after all, felt justified moving into Kuwait.

It makes no difference that his reasoning placed the tyrant outside the realm of civilized behavior. In his mind, as Hitler before him, he built up a case for his aggression he thought the world would swallow, at least to the point of ignoring his move, as Europe once acquiesced to the seizure of Czechoslovakia.

Once astride Kuwait's oil resources, the Iraqi leader was prepared to deal "reasonably" with customer nations, I have no doubt. Given a few months' respite, he believed that he could have cut a deal the world might very well have been willing to buy.

On the other hand, in my view, it would have been only a matter of time until he tried the same gambit on the Saudis, reaching for Islam's holiest places as well as the world's

largest petroleum veins.

At the point his army marched into Mecca, Saddam Hussein would have crowned himself the new Arab caliph, to the cheers of millions from as far away as Algeria. In no case could he have created a united Islamic superpower, as he dreamed.

It was the Iraqi leader's misfortune that his move against Kuwait came at the precise moment the Soviet Union and the United States had achieved full detente, signaling the absolute death of the superpower era, at least for now.

As matters stand, the dictator's cause is dying. This does not mean the man is not still dangerous. He is capable of following Hitler in yet another way, pulling down his people into the grave with him. And that danger will exist long after his last soldier departs Kuwait.

Nevertheless, it is important to understand that the Iraqis are not northern Europeans, conditioned from birth to render acquiescence to authority. They accept despotism but never without limits. Their history is littered with assassinations, a word invented in the region.

Arabs tend to follow a leader only so long as he appears a winner, with a single exception. After centuries spent eating sand under foreign overlords, they rally together against any outside attack.

Invading Iraq, as voices in the media have urged, would in the curious logic of the Middle East serve chiefly to affirm Saddam Hussein as a modern hero to the Arab dispossessed masses.

The tyrant's death at this time, by whatever means, has the potential to convert the mass murderer into a martyr. In that event, the oil fields would run red with blood, not all of it Arab. The impetus to fanatical terrorism can only be imagined.

America's best tactic is waiting, as the Carolinas' ribbons symbolize. Swapping the yellow rosettes for funereal wreaths may come. But the swapping must not be rushed.

The men and women in our professional armed forces (and their families) are entitled to our support in full measure, including that which most Americans find most difficult to give: our patience.

As the doughty old warrior Winston Churchill put it: jaw-jaw is better than war-war. Every time.

Instead of rattling sabers, these are days for rolling prayer beads, with the hope that talking will bring the boys (and girls) back to both Beauforts, safe and as sound as several months in the desert leave anyone.