Opinion: Return war power to Congress

By Cal Thomas

On Sept. 2, 1945, aboard the battleship USS Missouri at the end of ceremonies marking the unconditional surrender of Japan and the formal end of World War II, Gen. Douglas MacArthur spoke for a world weary of war and hoping for peace: "Let us pray that peace be now restored to the world and that God will preserve it always."

That prayer was not answered as Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and a host of regional and tribal conflicts have preserved war, not peace, as the means by which too many attempt to settle their differences.

Cal Thomas

With U.S. combat operations in Iraq effectively over and Afghanistan in the process of winding down (for us, if not for the resilient enemy) there will be little rest between wars as Iran now appears to be the next target.

Politicians start wars, generals plan strategy to wage them and soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen (not to mention civilians) die in them. Since the beginning of the human race, people have sought ways to prevent wars, but every attempt at bringing lasting, or even short-term peace, has failed.

At the United States Military Academy in West Point, N.Y., there are some who are now asking the hard questions about America's role in warfare. Elisabeth Bumiller of The New York Times wrote about it in a story with the headline, "West Point Asks if a War Doctrine Was Worth It."

The discussion, even debate, at West Point is first about the effectiveness of counterinsurgency in places like Afghanistan. Col. Gian P. Gentile, director of West Point's military history program, is quoted as saying that counterinsurgency could work in Afghanistan if the United States makes a multi-decade commitment: "I'm talking 70, 80, 90 years," he said. With many countries, including France, pulling out of Afghanistan (in France's case earlier than previously expected due to orders from the country's new president) and with shattered economies in need of rebuilding, including our own, this leads to a larger question: Can America afford to virtually "go it alone" in defense of the liberty of others who are not willing, or able, to bear the burden and pay the price for their own freedom?

I'm not sure there is a satisfactory answer to the question but it is a question that needs to be debated since we always seem to be the ones who pay the highest price. "Is it worth it?" How will we measure worthiness? These are questions at the heart of the debate.

Former President George W. Bush said, "We're fighting them over there so we don't have to fight them here." But we are already fighting them here as demonstrated by Sept. 11, 2001, the Fort Hood shootings and numerous other successful and unsuccessful attacks.

Somewhere between "come home, America," which would lead to isolationism and intervention in every conflict there is a pragmatic approach to war that America should consider. This ought to be an issue in the upcoming election, but it won't be unless journalists ask the right questions and demand answers

from those who have, or are seeking, the power to start or join wars and send our sons and daughters to fight and perhaps die in them.

Perhaps a return to the constitutional principle that only Congress has the power to declare war would help. That is what Rep. Ron Paul argued for during the presidential primary. He raised an important issue, one that should be discussed now, before the next war starts and American leaders decide another generation of young people should fight it.

Cal Thomas is co-author (with Bob Beckel) of the book "Common Ground: How to Stop the Partisan War That is Destroying America".