

WAR

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Korean War, the Vietnam War and the first Gulf War — may have faded in importance.

Their effects seem diminished by time, at least a little, and especially to younger people, they say.

And as Lee County's 630,000 residents celebrate yet one more Independence Day on July 4, the current war or wars affect few, personally. Even so, many insist that the war weighs deeply in their thoughts about our lives here now, about our obligations in the world, about our economy, and about how we choose future leaders.

For that reason, Florida Weekly has chosen the Independence Day week of 2008 to interview citizens on the street. Our aim was simple: to garner their opinions about the Iraq War and its effect on them, the rest of us, and the coming presidential election in November.

There are two costs cited by many — the cost in blood and the cost in money. In the Iraq War alone, about 170 Floridians in service to the Army, the Navy or the Marine Corps have been killed (roughly 4,100 Americas have died), and about 1,600 from the Sunshine State wounded in action, according to news reports.

Meanwhile, the U.S. spends about \$300 million per day, and will have poured \$650 billion into the war before year's end, analysts say.

Coincidentally, many news organizations have chosen to diminish their coverage of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars — notably major television stations, which spend only a few minutes per week now devoting broadcast time to war reports, and in some cases have completely withdrawn their bureaus in Iraq and Afghanistan, or greatly diminished them.

The flood of daily information that could be found in print media five years ago has slowed to a relative trickle, as well. But still the wars play on.

Here, then, is what some of us think of it.

>>David Mitchell, 54, waterfront caretaker, Caloosa-hatchee Regional Park. Born and raised in Annapolis, Maryland:



"At first, I felt we had a mission in Iraq. Now I feel ups and downs about it, I'm ambivalent.

"But I feel that almost as a tribute to what we've invested — in terms of lives — we need to leave there with

our heads held high. We have to complete the mission.

"I think there are a lot of things we'll never know about Iraq, that we're not being told. It's a bad situation. War's a bad situation to begin with. And there are always people who are only against it, no matter what the situation, no matter how necessary it might be.

"Yes, this is definitely going to affect my vote. I don't favor candidates who are no more qualified to understand Iraq than I am, and who don't want to make themselves qualified. I think I'll vote for somebody who will be understanding of what we need to do in this war.

"I'll also say I wish I felt better about it, and about the candidates. For the last few elections I haven't felt good about my vote.

"I do think the war affects every-

one — everyone who has a friend or a friend of a friend who's dead or wounded. And there's a lot we're being sheltered from, I believe. What it is, we're just getting pieces of what's going on. So it's not a good situation."

>>Brian Murray, 18, grocery store manager. Born in Naples, lived in Maryland and Arkansas, recent graduate of Riverdale High School:



"In the beginning I was in favor of this, with what happened on 9/11. But now it seems like we're out there just being 'The Americans Who Fix Everything.' But I don't think you can fix something that's broken this bad.

"I was in ROTC in high school, and asthma kept me out of the service, but a bunch of my friends are in — two in the Marines, five in the Army and one in the Air Force. We've tried to fix this, but our economy has gotten so bad, we can't do it now, we shouldn't do it now. I learned that in my economy class in high school, and in working at a grocery store, where you're looking at how everything just goes up.

"Yes, this will probably influence how I vote. I'm excited, it's my first time voting. I see it as, we've been over there for almost 7 years (Afghanistan and Iraq), and we're not fixing it, so we have to now.

"But my perspective on how things are here, and how hard we have it, has changed a lot. I just got back from Nicaragua — I went on a mission there — and those people have to eat rice and beans everyday, they struggle just to get enough food and to live. So when I hear people complain here, I don't have as much sympathy."

>>Hilda Padilla, 50, advertising specialist for Southeast Toyota Distributors, born and raised in Puerto Rico. Armando Padilla, 40, owner of Machado Landscaping, born and raised in Cuba:



(Hilda): "I just don't think we should be in Iraq, because of the economy."

(Armando): "America is passing through a very bad economy, and we have to solve that problem first, now. I notice a great deal in the landscaping business — the driving is costly, and there is less work."



(Hilda): "And I think the war effects everybody. Here (at the Harborside Convention Center,

downtown) we're putting on a show for Telemundo, 'La Familia,' in which there's help for Hispanic families with their health, and on their financing and financial situations, and other things. You notice it with everybody — the economy. And yes, the Iraq war has an effect on that.

"As for my vote, yes, I think the war will change how I vote. We shouldn't be there, now."

>>Steve Driscoll, 61, retired. Born and raised in Chicago:



"Unfortunately, I think we need to carry on and finish this war, because of the strategic importance of the Middle East. I say, 'unfortunately,' because I wish that wasn't the case. I think a lot of Americans may feel

that way.

"Does the war affect us? Probably not. And it won't unless we have a draft instituted. And I think we should. Others have used it effectively — Israel, for example. And there can be a lot of other uses for conscription services besides the military — airport security would be one. So I do believe in the draft.

"As for my vote, sure, the war will probably affect it because I believe we should finish the job, and if one candidate doesn't want to, he won't get my vote."

>>Jesus Herrera, 34, jobless and homeless, born and raised in Puerto Rico, with his son, Jesus Herrera, Jr., 2 months:



"For me, from my perspective, I say the war is wrong, because we're spending too much money. People here need the money.

"My wife is now living in the shelter, and I'm living on the street — we

were living at my sister's, but there are problems there now, so we can't.

"So why spend so much in Iraq when you could be helping people in the street, or creating jobs so they could work?

"I understand about terrorists, and stopping them. But why don't we help our people here first, instead of people in Iraq?

"I'm trying to find a job that will pay the rent. In part-time jobs it's hard to get enough to pay \$700 or more for rent, and food and clothes. And there's a lot of people in line for jobs now, in Florida. So my wife might have to go back to Dominica (her native home) while I try to find work here and send money to her.

"And while they're spending all that money in Iraq, they could be helping people on the street."

>>George Farley, 55, and his wife, Jackie Farley, 52, road warriors. Born and raised in upstate New York and Delaware, respectively:



(George): "I think we shouldn't be in Iraq because for one, it's turning into another Vietnam. And what good was that?"

"And now we've lost all these lives, and we have all these wounded, and we have to take care of them for the rest of their lives, and that's a lot more money. But we have to do it, because they're family.

"So I think the war is their problem (the Iraqi's problem)



now, it shouldn't be ours.

"The war won't affect my vote because I think a president is just a puppet. Congress is running it, and they're elected for life, or they can be. So they're the ones we have to be concerned about."

(Jackie): "At this point, more or less, I'm thinking we should be out of it, done with it. We should start worrying about us again. Literally, they've made us hostages.

"As far as my vote, the war could affect it, but probably not. Because the candidates are both saying about the same thing. 'Whoever is selected as president has got to finish it, regardless if they say they want to get out sooner or later. Everybody knows we have to get out.'"

>>Miriam Fercil, 25, mother, born and raised in Lee County, with her son, Malicue Fercil, 2:



"Well, the war doesn't affect anybody I know, but I still feel strongly that they should let our people come back home. They deserve to be with their families, not over there.

"And it seems like ever since we've gotten over there, everything here has just gotten worse, it's just messed up. It's like we're going down the drain.

"So yes, I hope Obama becomes president because I think he's going to let the people come home, and go back to their families. I feel so sorry for the families that are missing people because of that war." ■

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the numbers

Lee County veterans by the numbers

>> In the American Community Survey of 2006, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 456,872 people 18 years of age or older lived in Lee County. Of those, 65,509 were veterans.

>> Gulf War veterans accounted for 11.6 percent of that number; the percentages of veterans from the Vietnam era, Korea and World War II, respectively, were 26.2, 20.2 and 22.8 percent.

>> Of the total numbers, 93.5 percent of veterans were male, and 6.5 percent were female. 95.6 percent were white, 2.8 percent were black or African American, and 3.6 percent were Hispanic or Latino of any race. Almost 1 percent were listed as "some other" race, such as Native American.

>> Veterans tended to have a higher educational level for college degrees, a lower unemployment level (it was 2.7 percent compared to 4 percent in the general population of those 25 and older two years ago), and a higher median income (\$35,040 compared to \$27,123).

Source: U.S. Census Bureau