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Saturday, November 12, 2005

Guest Viewpoint: Keep troops in mind at holiday time

BY VICTOR D. LOPEZ

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As the Thanksgiving holiday approaches, most of us will spend some time reflecting upon the many things for which we are grateful. As we count the blessings of family, health, work, and the privilege of living in our great country, I hope we will remember to offer thanks to our men and women serving with honor in dangerous places around the world to safeguard what we hold most dear.

People of good conscience can find themselves on opposite sides of the ongoing debate on the necessity, wisdom or purpose of the current military action in Iraq. Such a debate is ultimately healthy for our democracy, however unpleasant or divisive the process may appear while we are actively engage in it.

But we must remember that while the debate continues, our students, our families, our neighbors and our friends are the ones on the ground, in harm's way, not only in Iraq and Afghanistan, but in many other dangerous places around the world, completing their assigned missions and paying with their sweat, blood and lives for the freedom we enjoy.

As with any large group, there will occasionally be individuals among them who will bring dishonor and disgrace to themselves, their unit and their country. Can we not say the same among our own families, neighbors and friends? As a group, however, these brave men and women represent what is best in America and stand as untarnished, enduring symbols of freedom, honor and country no less powerful than the flag they both uphold and represent.

More than 2,000 of these brave souls have given their lives in Iraq alone. A proud, smiling photograph of a soldier in a uniform worn with great pride flashing across our television screens on the evening news is too weak a tribute to their sacrifice, or to the sacrifice of the families and friends they leave behind.

Holidays are an especially difficult time for our troops. They need to know that they are not forgotten, and need tangible reminders of their nation's appreciation for their faithful service and self-sacrifice. As you plan your holiday parties and enjoy the ritual of shopping for holiday gifts for friends and loved ones, please consider writing a letter or sending a care package to a member of our armed forces in harm's way.

Visit your local post office and ask about their current effort to send prepaid phone cards to our troops. A \$10 donation buys a phone card that soldiers can use to contact their families, which the U.S. Postal Service ships to troops in the field free of charge. You can also visit <http://anysoldier.com> to find out how to send letters or care packages to specific soldiers in harm's way who would like to hear from you. I was surprised to learn about some of the requested items (coffee, cocoa,

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coffee mugs, junk food and of course phone cards to call home, among many others).

Remember, too, the families of our servicemen and servicewomen who grieve our fallen heroes or anxiously await the safe return of loved ones in the field. They also need our support and the comfort that comes from heartfelt expressions of our gratitude.

Expressions of love and support for our troops and their families is an excellent way to honor the memory and sacrifice of all the brave men and women who have paid the ultimate price in the service of their country in the current and all past conflicts. I can think of no better or more compelling way to give thanks this holiday season.

Lopez is dean of business at Broome Community College.

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