

How can I express my opinions on current world affairs (or listen to others' opinions) without turning everything into an argument?



At Work:

Talking about politics in the business setting has always been discouraged. Since people's personal politics don't necessarily jibe with their work skills, discretion is usually the better part of valor. However, today it's almost impossible to escape talk about the war in Iraq. In a setting where the war may actually impact the business, you may find yourself having to discuss it. The key: limit your conversation to the business issue at hand rather than a discussion of your beliefs about the conflict. "Perhaps we should postpone our conference for several months when the uncertainty of the war is lessened." "We should continue business as usual even if things are quieter around here while the war is going on." Certainly the people who run the NCAA Basketball Tournament had to discuss the war as they decided to continue with the tournament. Hopefully they kept their personal feelings about the war out of the business discussion. Should someone else at the table proceed with a commentary about the war, simply refrain from jumping in. Your lack of response will effectively end the "non" discussion.

At Social Gatherings:

The war in Iraq is everywhere and you are sure to encounter it at the next social gathering you attend. It's hard to know the views of the person next to you. It's like the old proverb about the elephant in the living room. It's obvious but nobody talks about it. Then someone does! What do you say? What if you find yourself on the opposite side of the issue? Don't battle it out right there in the living room. Keep the dialogue from becoming personal. Talk about the issues, not the patriotism of the person. Search for common ground. Regardless of your beliefs, we can all feel empathy for the families of soldiers. No one wants to see Iraqi civilians killed and injured. We all hope for a quick resolution and peace in the region. Switch the discussion to a more neutral topic—for example, the news coverage. Do you think it's helpful or a problem? This can turn the discussion away from your opposing opinions of the politics of the situation. Finally, consider changing the subject. The NCAA tournament, the Academy Awards, the weather, maple sugaring, the concert at school, the fish you caught this weekend...Have a short

conversation about the “elephant” and then move on.

Around Children:

Children see the war on TV, they hear it on the radio, they overhear adults talking, they read about it in magazines. War brings the epitome of uncertainty to the forefront. When kids see the images of bombs in Baghdad they wonder about the kids who live there. It's unsettling at best and very scary at worst. Parents should take the initiative to talk with their children at the child's level of understanding. If children are young, parents should assure their children that they are safe in their homes and that the adults around them are prepared to take care of them. With older children, parents should offer them the opportunity to ask questions and talk through the answers. As with many serious discussions, listen to your children. Answer their questions without giving them a lot of information they didn't ask for. A long discussion about the conventions of war when all the children asked was where the Iraqi soldiers that have surrendered will stay, may cloud the issue further.

On the other hand, it is difficult to talk to other people's children about this war. You do not know how their parents feel, and it may be at odds with your point of view. If you are with a group of children, you can model respect for a diversity of ideas. You can show how it's possible to have differing beliefs and that the beauty of the country we live in is that we are free to express those differences. Focus on those things that you know everyone agrees with. Talk about the soldiers and their families and how we all hope for peace.