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LOYALTY

They're fighting for us. So why aren't we fighting for them?

Our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and their families constitute a special-interest group that doesn't interest enough Americans

By TIM HOLLENBACH

Now that the election's over, I'd like to talk about my special-interest group: Sara wants to be a teacher. After high school, like many kids, she stumbled a bit while away at college. Wasn't quite ready for all that freedom. But she met Tim, fell in love, grew up and now is more than halfway home toward her degree in elementary education.

Tim, too, stumbled a bit after high school, but eventually found a good job with a utility company. He met Sara on the day he was leaving Belleville for Arizona. But he was smitten and soon moved back.

Sara, now 22, was the girl he had been waiting for; Tim, now 25, is the boy who can make it all come true for her. They've made a home for themselves in a small duplex in Fort Benning, Ga., together earning about \$20,000 a year, while they wait for Jan. 5, when Tim will be shipped out to Baghdad.

Sara's paying for school herself while working full time as a bank teller. Their combined income makes them ineligible for most government aid programs. It would have been better for them financially if they were unmarried and unemployed. But she

knows the value of hard work and responsibility, so she does the right thing. This girl who brooded some in high school and got a little lost in college smiles and laughs all the time. She's carrying a 3.7 grade-point average and recently earned an "A" in calculus.

When the war with Iraq began, Tim felt it was his duty to enlist in the U.S. Army, against the advice of his parents — both of whom had made careers in the military — and against the advice of his future father-in-law. The future father-in-law, in fact, was not at all happy with this development. "Where is this guy going with my little girl?" he wondered. But after a long talk one night, Tim quieted the future father-in-law with this question: "So who would you send in my place? Your sons?"

Now, Tim trains. He has been in the army for a little over a year and has spent eight weeks of basic training in Kentucky, a month training in the California desert and another two months in the Louisiana bayou. He runs about 10 miles a day. He spends his time learning how to drive a tank, jump out of an airplane, shoot a gun and distinguish between an Iraqi friend and an Iraqi enemy.

He's physically strong and mentally tough. He's confident of his abilities and would walk through hell with a can of gas to rescue a member of his tank unit. He wears a beeper or cell phone whenever he leaves his base in case his unit gets its deployment orders suddenly. Last week, he got shots in preparation for going overseas. His arm filled up with infection, and he vomited for three days.

Tim says he's not worried, but he bought a

Labrador puppy so Sara won't be lonely while he's away. He treats Sara like she's the only reason for being alive, and he's not far wrong.

So they wait for Jan. 5. And they laugh, make love, argue, work, have fun, go to school, train, talk on the phone. Live. Most of all, they enjoy being newly married and in love.

They don't worry about Jan. 5; they put it out of their minds. When they speak of the future, it's always "when Tim gets back from Iraq." They're optimistic and full of confidence. They love their families, their country, baseball, their kitten and puppy and each other. Sara and Tim are the kids who make this country the strongest on earth: the latest greatest generation.

Sara and Tim are my special-interest group. Sara and Tim and all the other kids in their position. I think it's time we started paying attention to the needs of the kids we're sending out to fight our battles.

Where are the Washington lobbyists for these kids? I don't see their spokespersons on "Larry King Live." I haven't seen any advocacy ads on TV. Has the Catholic church spoken out for these kids, as it has for its priests accused of molesting children? What's the religious right's position on troop support? I haven't seen any of their literature on it. Hey, you right-to-lifers: Don't these kids have as much right to life and a future as a day-old embryo?

I ask the same of the gay-rights groups, the environmentalists, the Americans with disabilities, the AARP, the women's rights groups, the National Rifle Association, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the unions . . . all the special-interest groups. Shouldn't the interests of these kids who are protecting our way of life come before everything else on the agenda?

Hell, a lot of the troops heading to the front have to buy their own armor for the flak jackets they'll wear. Their enlistments are being extended without their permission. They're driving tanks designed to fight the Russians, not in urban guerrilla warfare. In the latest campaign in Fallujah, they're being asked to control an insurgent-infested city without sufficient troop strength by teaming with Iraqi locals who may or may not be on their side. And even if their Iraqi partners are loyal and speak English, their radios are programmed to different frequencies. Is anyone looking out for these kids, protect-

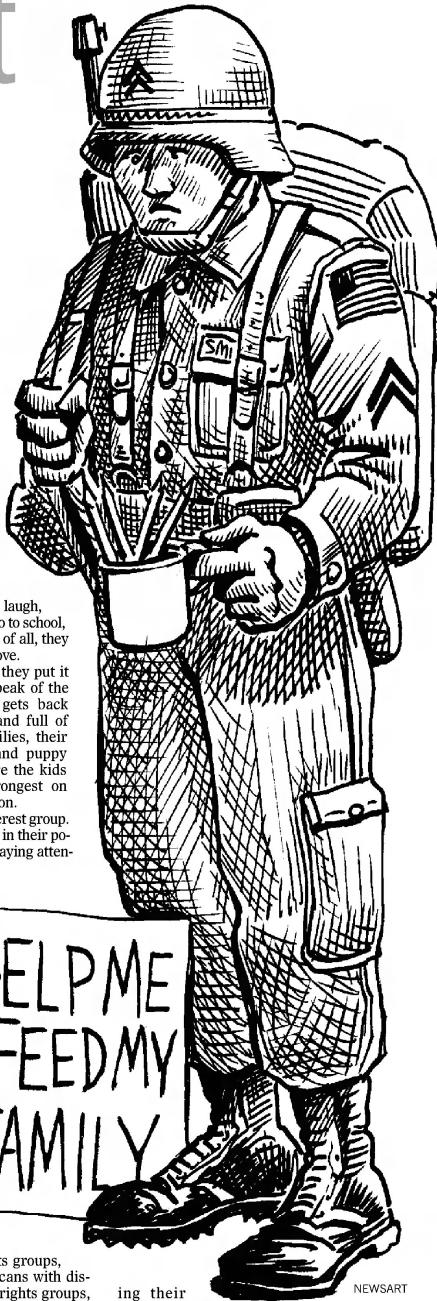
ing their interests?

I sure don't see it.

I do see, though, that voters told exit pollsters that moral issues — encompassing things like gay marriage, stem-cell research, abortion and sex in the media — swayed their decision more than any others. The war in Iraq — which should include the issue of troop safety, exit strategy and future deployments — came in fourth. Amazing.

This doesn't seem very moral to me. But maybe my priorities are mixed up because I have a special interest, and I don't care about much else. Sara is my daughter, Tim is her husband, and excuse me if I don't get too worked up about gay marriage and Howard Stern.

Come home safe, Tim. Our country's counting on your service. But don't count on a whole lot of support.



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