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Rawles: My protest honors reality of freedom flag represents

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My recent decision not to stand for or participate in the Pledge of Allegiance until our troops come home from Iraq has raised several questions. Here are answers to some of those questions.

QUESTION: Why did you decide to protest now?

ANSWER: When President Bush admitted that his policy until two weeks ago was a slow failure, coupled with his announcement of sending more troops to do more of the same, I realized that the current policy will only achieve a slower failure.

Q: Why do you believe the president's new policy is doomed to fail?

A: Iraq has no history or tradition of the rule of law, religious tolerance, protection for the rights of the minority, freedom of speech, etc. Whenever we remove our troops, the religious sect in power will impose a theocratic dictatorship and repress and suppress the other sect. We are only postponing this inevitable result and the delay is not worth a single American life. This is a religious civil war that American soldiers cannot control and there is no legitimate national security reason to put them in harm's way.

Q: Are you willing to risk losing the war?

A: We won the war. The two legitimate national security threats that prompted our invasion of Iraq - weapons of mass destruction and Saddam Hussein - have been completely and satisfactorily resolved in our favor. Now, however, we are engaged in nation building, and our troops are being used as pacifiers in a religious civil war.

Q: What about the threat of international terrorism? Won't our departure from Iraq turn the country into a haven for terrorists?

A: I can think of no better recruiting tool for terrorists than our continuing presence in Iraq. Our involvement in their civil war is breeding new generations of terrorists in both religious sects.

Q: Even if you are right about the war, why and how could you drag our flag and the pledge into the debate?

A: Our flag and the pledge are symbols of the freedoms guaranteed us by the Constitution. The same Constitution gives us the right to utilize those symbols in

protest of our country's policies. By using this symbolic gesture, I was, in my mind, honoring the tradition and reality of freedom, which those symbols represent. This was, in fact, a celebration of the freedoms we have in this country.

Q: But don't you realize that you have offended many people by your refusal to do the pledge?

A: Of course I do. That is what political speech is supposed to do. Political speech should challenge, irritate, infuriate, create friction, be thought provoking. I want people to think about this war, its lack of a true military mission and its inevitable ending. Freedom means allowing people to do things that you find morally reprehensible so that you, too, can exercise that right.

Q: Why at a City Council meeting? Shouldn't you have made your protest on your own time, not the city's?

A: Once I decided that I could no longer, in good conscience, say the pledge, my failure to say the pledge at a council meeting became inevitable. It is on every council agenda, so I had to deal with it at a council meeting.

Q: Aren't the pledge and our flag above politics?

A: No. The pledge and the flag are symbols of our freedoms. I believe the freedoms are more important than the symbols.

Q: What kind of message do you believe you are sending to our troops?

A: I have the highest respect and admiration for our brave men and women serving in Iraq. I am the grandson of a volunteer World War I veteran, the son of a volunteer World War II veteran and the brother of a 23-year career Army officer. This protest is not directed to the soldiers. It is directed to those in power who have placed them in harm's way with no true military mission. I believe that the soldiers will understand that I am utilizing the freedoms that so many have fought for through the years.

Q: Don't you love our country?

A: Of course I do. Dissent is the highest form of patriotism and standing up for what you believe is the purest form of love, even if there are consequences.

Tom Rawles is on Mesa's City Council.

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