



AP photo special to The Journal / Toby Talbot

In the central Vermont town of Calais, home to National Guardsman killed in Iraq, voters at yesterday's annual Town Meeting hold up cards in support of a resolution to pull out U.S. troops "with all deliberate speed." The measure passed, 133 to 31.

In Vermont, war under fire

At time-honored Town Meeting, the arguments are usually about budgets and schools. Yesterday, the heated words were over life and death in Iraq.

09:07 AM EST on Wednesday, March 2, 2005

BY SCOTT MacKAY
Journal Staff Writer

CALAIS, Vt. -- The shuffle of boots on pine floor was the only sound heard above the whisper of snow falling outside as Town Meeting opened yesterday morning.

In the central Vermont town of Calais, home to National Guardsman killed in Iraq, voters at yesterday's annual Town Meeting hold up cards in support of a resolution to pull out U.S. troops "with all deliberate speed." The measure passed, 133 to 31.

The roughly 200 voters bowed their heads at 10 o'clock to remember Vermont Army National Guard Sgt. Jamie Gray, scion of a family that has farmed a Calais hillside for seven generations.

Gray, 29, was killed in June by a roadside bomb in Iraq. He was the 10th Vermonter killed in the U.S. intervention in Iraq; four have died since.

As noon approached, the residents of Calais -- as was the case in about 50 other communities across Vermont yesterday -- engaged in a vigorous debate over U.S. policy in Iraq and the use of National Guard troops to prosecute the war.

"The only way to support the troops is to bring them home so no more of them die," said Art Edelstein to the cheers of his neighbors, who voted overwhelmingly to approve a resolution supporting a pullout of U.S. troops from Iraq "with all deliberate speed."

Antiwar activists and critics of President Bush gathered signatures to put the Iraq resolution on Town Meeting ballots in about 20 percent of the state's communities. In most municipalities, the resolutions were approved, but voters in several watered down the measure.

Voters in the town with the most Guard troops deployed in Iraq -- Underhill, outside of Burlington -- rejected it.

Of the communities reporting last night, the resolution was approved in 38, including the state's largest city, Burlington. It met defeat in just three communities. Three others declined to vote. And in the small community of Craftsbury, near the Canadian border, it was a tie.

VERMONT HAS PAID a steeper price than most other states for the U.S. involvement in Iraq. By several measures, it has the highest per-capita death rate of troops in Iraq of any state.

Debates about Iraq policy resonated yesterday across Vermont, a resolutely rural place with both a proud military tradition -- the state's tidy town greens are studded with granite monuments to Civil War veterans -- and a strong antiwar culture.

Calais, nestled in the snowy hills of central Vermont, population 1,528, voted 133 to 31 to support the troop pullout, but not before a debate that was cut off after 20 minutes when it threatened to get rough, pitting neighbor against neighbor.

"Results of the Iraqi elections have strengthened President Bush's resolve to stay the course in Iraq," said Geraldine Gilman, who spoke against the resolution. "I think all of us in the good old USA support President Bush and our troops . . . the only ones benefitting by us criticizing the president of the United States are the war criminals and the terrorists."

From across the Town Hall, J.C. Myers rose to speak, pulled at the bill of his baseball cap, and launched into a tirade against Iraq policies worthy of lefty filmmaker Michael Moore.

"Fourteen-hundred, fifteen-hundred Americans killed in Iraq," bellowed Myers. "For what purpose?"

Jack Russell, a Vietnam War veteran, objected to the resolution, saying it was disrespectful of troops serving in Iraq.

The resolution "is disingenuous; it lacks integrity," said Russell. "There are many National Guard troops who believe in what they're doing."

Some citizens wanted to continue the debate, but most saw no point in going on. "The debate wasn't going to change anyone's mind and it was time for lunch," said Nedene Martin, a selectwoman.

"People didn't want it to get divisive," said Jody Gladding. "Town Meeting is when everyone gets together after a long winter, and they don't want to get angry with each other."

CALAIS HUMMED with the timeless rituals of Town Meeting, a state holiday of sorts dedicated to local democracy that always occurs on the first Tuesday in March. Voters gather to decide local budgets and road and school questions, but sometimes they're also asked for their opinions on national and international questions.

It is the day the woodcutter lays down his chain saw, the accountant puts aside his tax work and the trucker leaves his rig to join their neighbors to decide the town's business for the upcoming year. As Calais voters have since 1868, they gathered in Town Hall, a white clapboard former church located on a dirt road in the Gospel Hollow section of town.

Yesterday, under a fresh garnish of snow, Cy Lambertson, a selectman, arrived at Town Hall at 5:30 a.m., as he does every year, to fire up the two potbellied wood stoves that heat the hall. The women of the Calais Ladies Home Mission donned aprons to serve lunch in the basement, as the mission has done annually since the 19th century.

Voters approved a town budget and discussed several new spending proposals, including \$35,000 to purchase an excavator to help clean out the culverts on the town's many miles of dirt roads. Donald Singleton, the town road commissioner, said the money is needed "because we've got to do a lot of ditching."

A woman agreed, saying a beaver dam behind her house raised havoc with a road.

Singleton received a standing ovation for the job he has done clearing snow from the town's 73 miles of roads, no mean feat when winter stretches from November to April. He got the money for the excavator, too.

Once a rock-ribbed Republican state, Vermont in the last two generations has become arguably the most Democratic, particularly on social issues. It was the first state, in 2000, to grant gay couples status akin to marriage through civil unions.⁸ It is the state that spawned Howard Dean's insurgent, antiwar presidential campaign, and went big for John Kerry over President Bush.

YESTERDAY'S RESOLUTIONS obviously have no binding effect, but the antiwar activists said it is important to continue to speak out against U.S. policy. Vermonters are

used to debating national and international issues at Town Meeting, a tradition that began in 1974 when voters in the tiny Connecticut River community of Thetford became the first municipality in the nation to call for the impeachment of President Richard Nixon.

Populist romance married Rockwellian myth to create a "small-is-beautiful" view of Vermont Town Meetings as the one true democracy left in a globalized world of huge and impersonal governments and corporations.

Norman Rockwell lived in Arlington, Vt., but he was no woodchuck; he discovered the state as other artists have for generations, during a summer sojourn from Manhattan. His iconic Town Meeting illustration, a rendering of one of Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms -- the freedom of speech -- depicts Carl Hess, a plaid-shirted gas station owner, grease visible beneath his fingernails, rising confidently to speak his piece on an equal footing with the men in suits and ties who flank him.

Even the experts say this is a cloying, anachronistic view of Town Meeting. As Vermont has become more suburban, as farms have been cut into housing lots, interest in Town Meeting in many communities has waned. Turnout for meetings is only about 20 percent -- and sometimes less -- of the electorate, said Frank Bryan, a University of Vermont political scientist who has spent his career studying Town Meeting.

Yet, Bryan said there is a lingering validity in Rockwell's portrait. In the state's smaller towns, Town Meeting remains a cherished rite, one that promotes community, civility and a face-to-face democracy that is unique in the United States.

These citizens may not always like each other -- familiarity breeds contempt in Vermont, as everywhere else. But in small communities, people have to learn to get along.

"Rural people are not the chosen people of God, as Jefferson claimed," said Bryan. "But if you live in a small Vermont town in the winter and you see a guy stuck in a ditch in the snow, you stop and help him. He may be a jerk, but you never know when you might be stuck in the same ditch and need his help to get out."

THE CULTURAL DIVIDE in the proud, scenic, poor and cold Green Mountains these days is between "flatlanders" -- the cosmopolitan, urban refugees who have emigrated to Vermont since the 1960s -- and "woodchucks," the description used by the natives, who, like Jamie Gray, the fallen guardsman, grew up fishing and hunting in the streams and woods and stuck around.

By most accounts, it is the natives who have joined the military -- drawn by tradition and, some say, the lack of economic opportunity in a place known as an easy place to live but a hard place to make a living.

"It's the woodchucks who are signing up for the National Guard," said Bryan, a state native and proud woodchuck. "I'll bet there is a clear class connection . . . it is the poorer natives, not the flatlanders, who are signing up and getting killed."

Digital Extra: Post tributes to troops from around the country, including Vermont, who are serving around the world, at:

<http://projo.com/extra/terror/tribute/>