

Another View

Worth reading.

Dennis

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George Bush coalesced American support behind invading Iraq, I am told, using two arguments: Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and the capability to deliver them, and Iraq was a supporter of Al-Qaeda terrorism, and may have been involved in the attacks of 9/11. Vicious words and gratuitous finger-pointing keep falling back on these points, as people insist that "we" were misled into what started as a dynamic liberation and has become a bloody counterinsurgency. Watching politicians declaim and hearing television experts expound on why we went to war and on their opinions of those running the White House and Defense Department, I have one question.

When is someone going to ask the guys who were there?

What about the opinions of those whose lives were on the line, massed on the Iraq-Kuwait border beginning in February of last year? I don't know how President Bush got the country behind him, because at the time I was living in a hole in the dirt in northern Kuwait. Why have I not heard a word from anyone who actually carried a rifle or flew a plane into bad guy country last year, and who has since had to deal with the ugly aftermath of a violent liberation? What about the guys who had the most to lose...what do they think about all this?

I was there. I am one of those guys who fought the war and helped keep the peace. I am a Major in the Marine Reserves, and during the war I was the senior American attached to the 1 Royal Irish Battlegroup, a rifle battalion of the British Army. I was commander of five U.S. Marine air/naval gunfire liaison teams, as well as the liaison officer between U.S. Marines and British Army forces. I was activated on January 14, 2003, and 17 days later I and my Marines were standing in Kuwait with all of our gear, ready to go to war.

I majored in Political Science at Duke, and I graduated with a Masters degree in government from the Kennedy School at Harvard. I understand realpolitik, geopolitical jujitsu, economics and the reality of the Arab world. I know the tension between the White House, the UN, Langley and Foggy Bottom. One of my grandfathers was a two-star Navy admiral; my other grandfather was an ambassador. I am not a pushover, blindly following whoever is in charge, and I don't kid myself that I live in a perfect world. But the war made sense then, and the occupation makes sense now.

As dawn broke on March 22, 2003, I became part of one of the largest and fastest land movements in the history of war. I went across the border alongside my brothers in the Royal Irish, following the 5th Marine Regiment from Camp Pendleton as they swept through the Ramaylah oil fields. I was one those guys you saw on TV every night- filthy, hot, exhausted. I think the NRA and their right-to-bear-arms mantra is a joke, but by God I was carrying a loaded rifle, a loaded pistol and a knife on my body at all times. My boots rested on sandbags on the floor of my Humvee, there to protect me from the blast of a land mines or IED. I killed many Iraqi soldiers, as they tried to kill me and my Marines. I did it with a radio, directing airstrikes and artillery, in concert with my British artillery officer counterpart, in combat along the Hamar Canal in southern Iraq. I saw, up close, everything the rest of you see in the newspapers: dead bodies, parts of dead bodies, helmets with bullet holes through them, handcuffed POWs sitting in the sand, oil well fires with flames reaching 100 feet into the air and a roar you could hear from over a mile away.

I stood on the bloody sand where Marine Second Lieutenant Therrel Childers was the first American killed on the ground. I pointed a loaded weapon at another man for the first time in my life. I did what I had spent 14 years training to do, and my Marines - your Marines - performed so well it still brings tears to my eyes to think about it. I was proud of what we did then, and I am proud of it now.

Along with the violence, I saw many things that lifted my heart. I saw thousands of Iraqis in cities like Qurnah and Medinah - men, women, children, grandparents carrying babies - running into the streets at the sight of us, the first Western army to arrive. I saw them screaming, crying, waving, cheering. They ran from their homes at the sound of our Humvee tires roaring in from the south, bringing bread and tea and cigarettes and photos of their children. They chattered at us in Arabic, and we spoke to them in English, and neither understood the other. The entire time I was in Iraq, I had one impression from the civilians I met: Thank God, finally someone has arrived with bigger men and bigger guns to be, at last, on our side.

Let there be no mistake, those of you who don't believe in this war: the Ba'ath regime were the Nazis of the second half of the 20th century. I saw what the murderous, brutal regime of Saddam Hussein wrought on that country through his party and their Fedayeen henchmen. They raped, murdered, tortured, extorted and terrorized those in that country for 35 years. There are mass graves throughout Iraq only now being discovered. 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, out of Camp Pendleton, liberated a prison in Iraq populated entirely by children. The Ba'athists brutalized the weakest among them, and killed the strongest.

I saw in the eyes of the people how a generation of fear reflects in the human soul.

The Ba'ath Party, like the Nazis before them, kept power by spreading out, placing their officials in every city and every village to keep the people under their boot. Everywhere we went we found rifles, ammunition, RPG rounds, mortar shells, rocket launchers, and artillery. When we took over the southern city of Ramaylah, our battalion commander tore down the Ba'ath signs and commandeered the former regime headquarters in town (which, by the way, was 20 feet from the local school.) My commander himself took over the office of the local Ba'ath leader, and in opening the desk of that thug found a set of brass knuckles and a gun. These are the people who are now in prison, and that is where they deserve to be.

The analogy is simple. For years, you have watched the same large, violent man come home every night, and you have listened to his yelling and the crying and



the screams of children and the noise of breaking glass, and you have always known that he was beating his wife and his children. Everyone on the block has known it. You ask, cajole, threaten and beg him to stop, on behalf of the rest of the neighborhood. Nothing works. After listening to it for 13 years, you finally gather up the biggest, meanest guys you can find, you go over to his house, and you kick the door down. You punch him in the face and drag him away. The house is a mess, the family poor and abused...but now there is hope. You did the right thing.

I can speak with authority on the opinions of both British and American infantry in that place and at that time. Let me make this clear: at no time did anyone say or imply to any of us that we were invading Iraq to rid the country of weapons of mass destruction, nor were we there to avenge 9/11. We knew we were there for one reason: to rid the world of a tyrant, and to give Iraq back to Iraqis.

None of us had even heard those arguments for going to war until we returned, and we still don't understand the confusion. To us, it was simple. The world needed to be rid of a man who committed mass murder of an entire people, and our country was the only one that could project that much power that far and with that kind of precision. We don't make policy decisions: we carry them out. And none of us had the slightest doubt about how right and good our actions were.

The war was the right thing to do then, and in hindsight it was still the right thing to do. We can't overthrow every murderous tyrant in the world, but when we can, we should. Take it from someone who was there, and who stood to lose everything. We must, and will, stay the course. We owe it to the Iraqis, and to the world.

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