

The Gulf War and Postmodern Memory

by Alex Vernon

When I returned from the Persian Gulf War 10 years ago, I sometimes found myself thinking—and less frequently found myself admitting to fellow veterans—that I wished the war had been bloodier. Not for Iraq. God no. For America.

The apparently flawless execution of Operation Desert Storm would, I thought, lead the army to conclude that its many systems required no serious rethinking. How, for example, would we have handled medical evacuation for significant casualties of an armored battle inside the enemy's territory, hundreds of miles away from adequate medical facilities? My band of lieutenant friends recognized the army's many imperfections, and, as young men do, cockily presumed to know much more than the experienced and knowledgeable people running the show. Those of us who had recently graduated from West Point *just knew* the military academy had become too soft, too nurturing—"kinder and gentler," in the parlance of our commander-in-chief. Our easy victory in the Gulf would hardly encourage a return to the days when West Point considered attrition a healthy culling process.

As for its effect on the nation, our victory, we were told, had rammed a wooden stake through the heart of "Vietnam." That undead, undying specter was finally dead and no longer sucking away at America's jugular. It was time for the nation to move on. Or so we were told.

I also found myself, during those first years after the war, declining to discuss military actions and possible military actions elsewhere in the world. I disqualified myself from answering the question of whether they should occur at all, on the grounds that I was neither expert enough in foreign policy nor detached enough to do so. I could not erase from the scenario the image of me *there* (wherever *there* was).

Should we be in the Balkans? That was the easy one: I don't know, I said, over and over again, but *I* wouldn't want to be there. Not as a tanker. Those mountains, those villages—that's not tank country, that's antitank country, that's nasty infantry country, promising bayonets and snipers and house-to-house fighting and narrow roads through mountain passes mined to kill me through the soft underbelly of my tank. Give me wide-open desert or give me



Burning oil field, U.S. officers, and a destroyed Iraqi tank—the Gulf War photo op as photo op.

nothing. By sticking to questions of terrain and tactics, I could always avoid the fundamental question: *Should* we be there? What about Rwanda? Somalia?

When the United States did send troops to Somalia, not long after I had resigned my commission and entered graduate school, the army eventually deployed elements of my old tank battalion, part of the 24th Infantry (Mechanized) Division out of Fort Stewart, Georgia. One of those elements was the platoon I had led in combat into Iraq, which was now under the leadership of a new lieutenant. One day at Stewart, before I left the army, he pulled up beside me at a stoplight as we headed back on post after lunch. Instead of waving hello, he shot me the bird. I thought: He'll be in the army for life.

My platoon had mobilized without me. How utterly wrong that felt. I belonged with them, wherever they were.

Remembering all the letters I had received in the desert, I wrote to members of the platoon, and to close friends deployed in other units. I wasn't sure whether our country should be in Somalia, and certainly not on the terms set by President Bill Clinton, with his bad habit of defining military operations in terms of months instead of actual objectives (to placate national fears of another endless Vietnam). But I thought *I* should be in Somalia.

I still feel duty's tug. About the Balkans now, for example. As uncomfortable as I was in a uniform leading soldiers—uncomfortable with the responsibility for hurting or killing others, or for getting my own soldiers hurt or killed—when I see deployed soldiers, I feel the distance between us, and I ache a little to join them. The situation gives me moral pause. A perverse nostalgia, you may say. Well.

An image comes, of Somalis dragging a dead American soldier through the streets, over and over again, courtesy of CNN.

A memory follows, of arguing with a friend about whether the news media should show such images. My friend was still in the army, and she believed that showing them did nothing but insult the memory of those men, disrespect their sacrifice, and pain their families, over and over again. I fished for reasons to defend the media. She accused me of having turned liberal on her at my new professional home, the famously progressive state university in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Years later, I have no answers, for her or myself, but I have better questions. Do such images preserve for us the memory of war's horror? Do they perpetuate a myth of American civility over Third World savagery, a myth of innocence we should know better than to believe, a myth that My Lai and other incidents from the Vietnam War, as reported in autobiographies and oral histories, should have forever expunged?

If the images do preserve for us the memory of war's horror, is that a good thing?

On the one hand, images of war's horror keep us in touch with what we talk about when we talk about war. That is what another war veteran, the novelist and essayist Tim O'Brien, had in mind back in 1980, a decade after he returned from his war—I was 13 years old—when he wrote to correct America's image of the maladjusted Vietnam veteran:

Contrary to popular stereotypes, most Vietnam veterans have made the adjustment to peace. Granted, many of us continue to suffer, but the vast majority of us are not hooked on drugs, not unemployed, are not suicidal, are not beating up wives and children, are not robbing banks, are not knee-deep in grief or self-pity or despair. Like our fathers, we came home from war to pursue careers and loves and cars and houses and dollars and vacations and all the pleasures of peace. . . . Well, we've done it. By and large, we've succeeded. And that's the problem. We've adjusted too well. . . . In our pursuit of peaceful, ordinary lives, too many of us have lost touch with the horror of war. Too many have forgotten—misplaced, repressed, chosen to ignore—the anguish that once dominated our lives. . . . That's sad. We should remember.

War is about suffering, and bleeding, and dying. That's what O'Brien wanted us not to forget. And when I stopped thinking (rather insularly) about the army and started thinking about the country, I realized that that's what I meant when I half-wished the Gulf War had been bloodier. O'Brien concluded:

It would seem that the memories of soldiers should serve, at least in a modest way, as a restraint on national bellicosity. . . . We've ceased to think and talk seriously

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about those matters for which we once felt such passion. What to fight for? When, if ever, to use armed forces as instruments of foreign policy? . . . We used to care about these things. We paid attention, we debated, passion was high.

So yes, the image of Somali citizens dragging the corpse of an American soldier through the streets might have its merits.

On the other hand. I didn't notice that my postwar aversion to discussing the politics of war had undergone a change until August 1998, when two bombs exploded near U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and we retaliated with an air strike against a reputed terrorist training camp in Afghanistan and another facility in Sudan, both run by Osama bin Laden, the probable force behind the embassy bombings. When the news of our retaliation broke, I was sitting in a seminar on postmodern literature. The following week, I wrote to the professor who led the seminar:

Last week we "smartly" bombed several suspected terrorist outposts, because we weren't strong enough to send troops, the only military action that could really achieve the mission and that bore any sign of moral courage (to ourselves or the world). The phrase "cruise missile" even suggests a kind of teenage wayward nonchalance, and the whole affair was executed with uncertain objectives and uncertain results, beyond the likely fueling of more terrorist and national fires against us. We injured the innocent in the process, and have invited the injury of innocent Americans. I know I am—we are—as responsible for that confused attack as the president; and we are made—legitimately so—terrorist targets because of it; and I am off to teach a class on Fitzgerald in the 1930s.

That last phrase, about Fitzgerald, so abruptly juxtaposed, underscores my continuing troubled relationship with myself as an academic, especially in today's postmodern university culture, where intellectuals can be taken seriously when they declare that Vietnam was a war waged on the television set and not on the battlefield, or that the Gulf War never even happened.

Then came our undeclared air war against Kosovo in the spring of 1999. I doubted that we could win—airpower alone had never before been sufficient to win a war. (I won't challenge here the tenuous assumption that air power alone, and not the threat of a ground force, determined the outcome.) As I had with our bombing of bin Laden's training camp, I thought it cowardly to prefer to risk a handful of casualties among "their" civilians rather than to risk the same number of casualties among our volunteer soldiers. We know that our smartest weapons cannot eliminate collateral damage, and that some civilians will die in any destructive operation of such proportions. When our no-risk intervention policy authorizes—legitimizes—the devaluation of the lives of the innocent, relative to our own more precious American lives, I hear echoes, however faint, of Dresden, Hiroshima, and even My Lai. I know full well that for every Scott Grady shot down and dramatically rescued,

the Serbs and Croats can produce hundreds, maybe thousands, of examples of suffering and heroism.

If images of brutally killed American soldiers, whether from Somalia or Vietnam, inspire a no-risk American military intervention policy, is that a good thing? I do not mean to suggest, as Madeleine Albright has done about our troops, that we should *use 'em 'cause we got 'em*. I don't know that plac-

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ing an occupation force in Kosovo, with all the attendant dangers and unsure purpose and duration of such an action, would have been preferable to what was done. I'm saying only that we need to understand war and ourselves a bit better. And I'm hardly the first to observe that our language of smart weapons and surgical strikes relies on misleading metaphors from science and medicine, as if we were removing a belligerent cancer. But that's a lie. We

aren't removing cells gone bad. We're killing people.

I also recognize that the impulse behind smart weapons is essentially and undeniably humane. It springs from the desire to wage pure wars, wars fought between military forces only, in which noncombatants are involved as little as possible. And it wants those pure wars waged humanely: We disable the enemy not by taking out hundreds of thousands of his troops but by knocking out his command, control, and resource centers. Yes, people will be killed. But not nearly as many as might otherwise have died. I recognize that, in a democracy, the case for American military intervention can rarely win the debate. When we intervene, we accuse ourselves of American imperialism. When we fail to intervene, we accuse ourselves of heartlessness. When our foreign-policy makers fall back on the amoral position of intervening only when American security and economic interests are at stake, we can hardly fault them, even as we accuse them of base self-interest and materialism.

We haven't completely exorcised the shade of Vietnam after all. And might that be a good thing?

* * *

Ten years. An infrequent friend of mine, when he learned I was working on a book about the Gulf War, wished me well and let me know, in no uncertain terms, that my war was "historically insignificant."

Perhaps. Probably. Nevertheless.

I don't know how military historians are dealing with the war in their scholarship and their teaching. Researching my book, I spent an afternoon at

the oral history branch of the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C., getting copies of interviews with officers and soldiers from my division. The custodian of the tapes told me I was only the third person to inquire about them, and the first to use them. The other two researchers, both academics, thought them useless, because the interviewees spoke of things the academics didn't care about, and in a lingo they didn't understand. It seems that military history is larger than individuals, and must be rendered in a language different from that of the soldiers fighting the wars.

However much the Persian Gulf War has or has not inspired military historians, it has become a darling subject for certain intellectuals of the post-modern and media studies variety. At its most extreme, their sort of theorizing produces statements such as Jean Baudrillard's "The Gulf War did not take place." For Baudrillard, so enamored of his own rhetoric of simulation—whereby representations of an object or event become real in themselves, and thereby challenge the reality of the original object or event—his rhetorical nullification of a historical event makes perfect sense. A different language indeed.

Other critics, such as the one compelled always to refer to the conflict as "the Persian Gulf TV War," treat it as if it were a species of "reality TV," like MTV's *Real World* or CBS's *Survivor*—a war arranged for the sake of the viewing audience and for the advertisers, but otherwise irrelevant, "a war that was actually contrived to look like a video game," "a simulation of live war," mere "infotainment." The hundreds of dead coalition forces and the thousands of dead Iraqis, the maimed, and the sufferers of Gulf War syndrome can apparently restore their lives with the push of a button. Because the war was televised, these postmodern and media studies intellectuals insist that the distinction between the spectator on the couch and the soldier in the field has dissolved. After all, they argue, the audience at



The author stands by the tank he commanded in the war.

home sees the video of smart bombs in flight, sees exactly what the operator sees, supposedly in real time, unfiltered and unedited. So the spectator's eyes become the soldier's.

Get real.

Here's what I, who apparently missed the war because I was in the war, imagine. The spectator, watching television, tires of the endless coverage, all those talking heads, and flips the channel to *Saturday Night Live* for some

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comic relief. But on comes a skit with Kevin Nealon imitating Norman Schwarzkopf. So the spectator flips the channel again, maybe to a late-night soft-porn flick, until he wearsies too of that sapless fantasy, wearsies of television altogether and of his long day, gives up and goes to bed. He sleeps somewhat fitfully.

But half a world away, we did not stop when the television clicked off. We pushed on through the night—praying that the officer in the tank up front knew where he was going, none of us knowing when to expect contact, when, with bursts of light and radio chatter, the night would explode.

In a 1984 essay on why men love war, William Broyles, Jr., wrote about “the sort of hysteria that can grip a whole country, the way during the Falklands war the English press inflamed the lust that lurks beneath the cool exterior of Britain. That is vicarious war, the thrill of participation without risk, the lust of the audience for blood. It is easily fanned, that lust; even the invasion of a tiny island can do it. Like all lust, for as long as it lasts, it dominates everything else; a nation's other problems are seared away, a phenomenon exploited by kings, dictators, and presidents since civilization began.”

Did Broyles, who clearly distinguishes the home-front experience from the battlefield experience, accurately and presciently describe the national mood in the United States during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm? Was the mood a kind of blood lust? I don't know. I wasn't here. I was there. I missed my war.

Because Iraq did not put up the fight that the military had warned us might occur, some postmodern intellectuals have played the revisionist trick of labeling the warnings lies and disinformation. For them, the warnings constituted a scripted pregame show, falsely hyping the underdog's abilities so that people would watch and be suckered into hoping for a sudden-death overtime. The revisionist chicanery forgets that the Iraqi army was the fourth largest in the world, and that its soldiers had years of combat experience, while our troops had none (but for the generals and sergeants-major who had fought as lieutenants and privates in Vietnam). The revisionism forgets that there was never any certainty Iraq wouldn't use chemical weapons, never any certain-

A Gulf War Primer

The Time Line:

August 2, 1990: Iraq invades Kuwait.

August 7, 1990: Operation Desert Shield begins.

January 17, 1991: Operation Desert Storm and the air war phase begin.

February 24, 1991: The Allied ground assault begins.

February 28, 1991: The cessation of hostilities is declared.

March 1, 1991: Cease-fire terms are negotiated.

By the Numbers:

Peak strength of coalition forces:

795,000 (U.S. 541,000, Allies 254,000)

Coalition casualties:

U.S.: 148 killed in action, 458 wounded in action

Allies: 92 killed in action, 318 wounded in action

Coalition aircraft losses:

U.S.: 63 (40 fixed-wing aircraft, 23 helicopters)

Allies: 12

Peak strength of Iraqi forces:

Estimates vary from an implausible 540,000 down to 250,000–400,000.

Iraqi casualties:

An estimate of 35,000 dead derives from circumstantial evidence.

Estimated Iraqi equipment losses:

Aircraft in air-to-air engagements: 42

Aircraft destroyed on the ground: 81

Iraqi aircraft flown to Iran: 137

Battle tanks: 3,700

Ships: 19 sunk, 6 damaged

Prisoners of war:

Captured Iraqis released by U.S. forces to Saudi control: 71,204

Sources: U.S. Department of Defense, *DefenseLINK*; and *The Gulf Conflict 1990–1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order*, by Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh (1993)

ty the ground war wouldn't be bloodier for us. Colin Powell feared we might find ourselves fighting in urban centers such as Basra, where Iraqi civilian women, possessed of the spirit of their Viet Cong sisters, would strap mines to their bellies and hurl themselves at our vehicles. My own division commander, Barry McCaffrey, confidently predicted that the ground war would last from four to 14 days, with a coalition victory. But he also predicted a 10 percent American casualty rate, and so made certain he had 2,000 replacements on hand for his augmented division of some 20,000 soldiers. (Given that all 2,000 replacements were infantry and armor soldiers, frontline troops, we can extrapolate a higher percentage of casualties in those direct-fire units, something closer to 15 or 20 percent. That translates to three of my platoon's 16 men. Hernandez? Wingate? Brown?) It is neither a lie nor disinformation when you believe what you say.

When literary-theorists-turned-war-commentators dismiss the geographic



Iraqi soldiers and an artillery piece, in a photo from a roll of film found in a captured Iraqi tank.

battlefield in favor of the cyberspace one, they fail to see what every soldier has always known: Terrain dictates. The jungle, not the economic condition of late capitalism, dictated the fragmented, chaotic, platoon-fought Vietnam experience. The desert dictated the clean, sterilized, division-scale encounters of the Gulf War, and possibly even contributed to our decision to wage war there, just as the eastern European mountains and villages possibly contributed to our limited Balkan intervention strategy.

The theorists' narcissistic imposition of their experience of the war on everyone else—including the actual combatants, the suffering Kuwaiti and Iraqi citizenry, and American families and friends for whom spectatorship was not a video game of omniscience but a nightmare of uncertainty—is tantamount to intellectual imperialism, a ruthless annexation of the actual by the rhetorical. Yet until Gulf War participants generate a worthy artistic response, literary and cultural academics who want to engage the war have little choice but to turn it into a text, into something they can analytically deconstruct—and therefore, only logically, something that was, from the beginning, constructed, produced, staged.

Still, I hope that we can salvage something from the postmodern prattle. If the boundary between spectators and soldiers has indeed dissolved, then the spectators must acknowledge the blood on their hands. We are all complicit. But such an acknowledgment is mere wishful thinking when many intellectuals, luxuriating in our Pax Americana, are more removed from the world than ever: They no longer survey events from their traditional aeries but from the distance of orbiting space stations. The wishful thinking also ignores the Gulf War's lasting legacy—the myth of the clean war, in which

our technological might brings foes to their knees and we risk not a drop of our own precious blood.

I want to call this myth our Gulf War syndrome, but for obvious reasons cannot. The myth of the clean war lets us hang on to another American myth, that of our enduring innocence. Tim O'Brien finds a similar phenomenon in the clichéd cinematic depictions of the Vietnam War. It's what we might call the myth of the mad war, as told most vividly in *Apocalypse Now*. That 1979 film "opted for a simple solution to a complex set of questions. By going after the Grand Answer—lunacy, the final heart of darkness—the film avoids and even discredits those more complicated, ultimately more ambiguous questions of what went wrong in Vietnam. It's just too damned easy to chalk it all up to insanity. Madness explains everything, right? No need to examine messy motives, because crazies don't *have* motives. No need to explore history, because lunatics operate *outside* it. No need to engage issues of principle or politics, because maniacs don't *think* about such things. The Grand Answer exculpates all of us: innocent by reason of insanity."

After the Gulf War, we have managed to cling to the myth of American innocence for exactly the opposite reason: because the war was clean, simple, uncomplicated, and nontraumatizing. That we inflicted great suffering and trauma is beside the point. Because we came out relatively unscathed, because we collectively experienced the war as a video game, we retain the wide-eyed innocence of children.

American's unflagging faith in its own innocence sometimes stands us well. Alexis de Tocqueville recognized that very quality as the source of our faith in our own perfectibility and in the future; we refuse to mire ourselves in the past, or even in the present. But believing in our innocence is also an easy way of ducking the hard questions. To be fair, some who harp on the televised aspects of the Gulf War do so to reveal the discrepancies between the television version and the real thing. Nevertheless, the effect of rendering the war in the language of literary theory is not unlike the effect of seasoning military discourse with such euphemisms as *collateral damage* and *surgical strikes*: Both remove us from the actuality. Power attends language. Reducing the war to theoretical jargon, or discussing it only as a television event, fosters an attitude of detachment and distance, of control and superiority, which in moral terms becomes an ideology of innocence.

Which is why I half-wished the war had been bloodier. To dispel the myth of the clean war. To make conversation about it conversation that matters.

* * *

In May 2000, Seymour Hersh, who had won a Pulitzer Prize back in 1970 for his exposé of the My Lai massacre, published a piece in the *New Yorker* that explored possible war crimes committed by U.S. soldiers in the Persian Gulf. His article accused my former division, the 24th Infantry (Mechanized), first, of a devastating, division-level, orchestrated attack—the Battle of the Causeway—on a practically defenseless column of retreating Iraqi soldiers and

civilians during the postwar cease-fire; and, second, of a general lapse in discipline, which led to a number of smaller, platoon-level potential war crimes.

The charge that the division commander, Maj. Gen. Barry McCaffrey, ordered a militarily unjustifiable attack against retreating forces is not new, a fact that Hersh acknowledges. The army cleared McCaffrey and the division shortly after the war, but Hersh and other observers have so documented their case that only future historians can settle the issue. About the possible, isolated, small-scale war crimes, Hersh's article comes down to a series of *he said/she said* affairs. Despite his conspicuous desire to repeat the success of his My Lai exposé, Hersh, to his credit, presents testimony on both sides.

I refuse to pretend to know what happened. My brigade did not participate in the suspect battle, and I witnessed no localized acts of atrocity. I will say, however, that Hersh's representation of the Iraqi army as totally without fight does not square with my experience. It was a modest war for our side, no doubt, but it was a war.

Richard Swain called his excellent book on the war *The Lucky War*. Yes, as combat soldiers go, we were an extremely lucky lot. (One study concluded that it was safer for military personnel to be in the theater of operations than to stay at home and risk training accidents and drunk-driving tragedies.) When Hersh quotes the memoir I co-authored with four other former lieutenants from my battalion, he chooses to present only instances in which we describe the enemy soldiers as being so pathetic and so mistreated by their superiors that their single action toward us was raising their hands in surrender. He does not cite those moments in our book when the Iraqis fought back, when artillery rounds and mortar fire and antitank missiles and small arms came speeding our way. Grant Hersh that our 24th Division did not meet significant Iraqi resistance. Still, the impression he might give some readers is that coalition forces throughout the entire theater encountered no greater enemy threat. Yet tank battles did occur, and a friend of mine in another division earned a Silver Star for crawling into a barbed-wire-laced minefield to clear it under enemy fire.

I appreciate Hersh's restoration of the human dimension of the war, along with its ambiguity. There were events (as in all wars) that warrant reinspection, and veterans who are still racked by what they did or saw. The television version, in which the war unfolded simply and cleanly, misrepresents the soldier's experience, and contributes to the spectator's illusion of understanding, just as television coverage of Vietnam did a generation before. For those of us in our moving vehicles, the fog of battle was made of the kicked-up sand, rain, smoke, tired eyes, and night.

* * *

They say you lose your innocence when you go to war, but I'm not so sure. You no more lose your innocence in war than you achieve adulthood when you lose your virginity. It takes a few years. It takes perspective. Maybe war leads to the loss, but the loss doesn't follow immediately. And if the loss does come with the war, you fight awareness of it, and hold on as long as you can to the illusion of innocence.

The oral history told by one fighter pilot in Vietnam reveals a man who understood that the war preserved his innocence: “At the end of my tour, I was not much more mature than when I left. When I got home, I became painfully aware that the world was passing me by. So I went back.” By going back for a second tour, he could keep the real world at bay; he could defer responsibility and growing up, and cling to adolescence. Yet might the pilot’s self-awareness indicate a sort of denial? By consciously associating lost innocence with hometown responsibility, he can, for a time, avoid contemplating the innocence lost over there in the war.

When the 20-year-old Ernest Hemingway returned from the Great War, he bragged about his wounding to audiences at his Oak Park high school and at ladies’ social clubs; he even showed the pants he had been wearing when the 200 bits of mortar shell shrapnel shredded his leg. When I first thought about this act of youthful bravado, I found it at odds with my understanding of someone who has lost his innocence. But now I’m not sure. It’s a critical commonplace to say that Hemingway’s writing shows a man’s futile attempt to recover the innocence of his prewar, prewound, preadult self—though, in his case, the complex web of his innocence and braggadocio and his attitude toward war is not so easily untangled.

Could it be that innocence itself is a fantasy? Is losing one’s innocence a myth that paradoxically preserves the very idea and possibility of innocence? By imagining its loss, its absence, we presuppose that it existed in the first place. What, after all, does it mean to lose one’s innocence? What were we before, and what do we become? The expression, as explanation, is too easy, too unsatisfying. Understanding requires a few years. It takes perspective. And in the end, we may find that we have no answers, only better questions.

* * *

My memory stretches 10 years thin, and strains. The passage of time both helps and hinders perspective. Hindsight clouds. Events obtrude. Innocence beckons. Revisionism rears.

Five years after the Gulf War, four fellow ex-lieutenants from our tank battalion asked me to complete a book project they had started two years earlier, which turned into the collaborative memoir quoted by Hersh. Writing about past selves helps us come to terms, the cliché offers. True enough, but hardly the whole truth. Past selves die hard, and slowly, if they die at all.

I was disturbed to read in the manuscript a diatribe by one of the ex-lieutenants against the cowardice of a young officer who opted not to deploy—disturbed because I had also seriously considered requesting permission to stay behind. I was shocked to read that another of the authors was nearly killed by friendly fire during a cross-border reconnaissance mission a few nights before the ground offensive—shocked because I had not heard the story before, and shocked because I had cheered that night when the company I was attached to

fired on what it presumed was the enemy. As it turns out, our targets could very well have been my friend and his platoon. We'll never know. Mostly, I was horrified to read a passage written by one of my closest and dearest friends about the second day of the ground war. His company, leading the battalion, encountered an outpost building. His commander ordered him to fire:

The sabot round rocketed from the gun tube like a thunderbolt and flew through the building, caving in the wall. Immediately, dozens of Iraqi infantry appeared and scattered about 600 meters in front of us like honeybees from a knocked-over hive. . . . We cut loose with machine guns from all of our tanks at the Iraqi infantry in front of us. . . . The enemy dismounts threw up their hands as we barreled toward them. My platoon ceased firing, rolled past them and over a dune on the far side of the building.

"Underberg, fire up that building," I ordered. I wanted to ensure we roused anything left after Downing's sabot.

Underberg loved firing his loader's machine gun. He jumped up in his hatch, swung it around, and put 100 rounds through the target in a few seconds. The building caught fire. A few Iraqis ran out the door. Underberg cut them down, riddling them with machine gun bullets.

As the platoon rounded the far side of the building, we found another 50 dismounts just sitting on the sand in a big group. . . . At last they mustered the energy to raise their hands to surrender. Had Underberg not been reloading, he probably would have already wasted the whole lot.

Reading this section of Rob's draft for the first time—to slip into soldier-speak—rocked my world. It sent me reeling, a brick ramming into my gut. I was dizzy, and nauseous, and tearful, and confounded. I had no idea what to

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say the next time I spoke to him; I had no idea whether I *could* speak to him. I couldn't shake the image of a dozen or so Iraqi soldiers, all in khaki, most with mustaches, fighting to escape a burning building, the first few sent to the ground by the bullets, the next cluster freezing in

place as the final group slams into their backs, the whole lot scrambling for their lives, some of them one last ignorant breath away from death.

I would never have fired on men fleeing for their lives from a burning building, I told myself. I would have forcibly prevented my loader from firing at soldiers huddled pacifically on the ground.

What could I possibly say to Rob? There was a period when I doubted I would be able to maintain the friendship at all. I had no idea how to edit the scene the way I had edited many smaller moments in the other authors' drafts, when they did not quite realize how their prose might be read.

Rob is the best storyteller of the group, and he plays up the effect of his cavalier attitude. Leading up to this event, he writes throughout the book



U.S. Marines guard a handful of the 71,000 Iraqis captured in the Desert Storm campaign.

about how his job is to shoot everything in his path and get his men home, and it sounds right, it sounds like exactly the right attitude. Until the passage. Reading it that first time, and for years afterward—in fact, until only very recently—I could never determine whether he was just being Rob, writing the way he talks to make a story exciting, without realizing how the telling hits the ear, or whether he was accurately conveying his cold-blooded, practically murderous disregard.

I didn't know how to soften the language and pull the punch. I didn't know how to tamper with a spirit so vastly foreign to my own. At most, I changed a couple of words and tweaked the punctuation.

Over time, I got past doubting the friendship. I did so by avoiding the subject altogether, with him and, as much as I could, with myself.

Then, out of the blue, Sy Hersh called me at home about his article several weeks before it appeared. He spoke to me about the Battle of the Causeway. He told me about eyewitness accounts he had collected of American atrocities committed against surrendering and surrendered Iraqi soldiers and against Iraqi civilians. We talked several times, though I had no particularly useful firsthand information for him. I let my fellow authors know about the article, and, in general, they dismissed the accusations. War is never black and white, they chorused. Not even that postwar cease-fire was black and white.

In the years immediately after the war, I dismissed any book that took a similar attitude toward exposing Gulf War atrocities. The authors weren't there, I reasoned. They can't begin to imagine what it was to be there. By dismissing the possibility of inhumane action by our army, I could deny the potential for it in me. Insisting on my own innocence enabled me to assume the moral high ground. It asserted (falsely) a certain detachment, related, I suspect, to the intellectuals' dismissal of the war as a merely virtual

happening. Both strategies, theirs and mine, arrogantly and inexcusably insisted on our own innocence.

In challenging me to reimagine the war from various perspectives, Hersh's article did something else for me. The situations loosely corresponded: McCaffrey's division faced a thousand vehicles that may or may not have posed a threat; Rob's platoon faced enemy soldiers who may or may not have posed a threat. Hersh did not quote Rob's passage, as I feared he might, as an example of morally dubious American action. I began to realize that I had judged Rob without fully imagining myself in his tank commander's hatch, even though I was in an identical hatch, never far away. I narcissistically imposed on him my experience of not having had to see the faces of the soldiers I shot at. Instead of identifying with him, I had chosen to identify with the victims. I had allowed my postwar knowledge of the war's relative ease to eclipse the true historical me, who rode into a battle of indefinite length and outcome, my hand never far from the trigger.

So Rob's passage haunts me now for different reasons. I've come to doubt my initial reaction, and I strongly suspect that I might have taken precisely the same action he took—because it was war, and you didn't know which of those apparently defenseless Iraqis had a grenade behind his back. Maybe what disturbed me when I first read Rob's story was less what he did, or how he wrote about what he did, than it was the unconscious realization of my capacity to do the same thing. But I wasn't prepared to admit that. In my denial I betrayed a friend, and an officer of the most honorable and capable sort. Only now does my memory fetch an old thought from the months after the war, when a string of ritual gang-induction murders occurred in Savannah: I thought, I could do that—not to join a gang, of course, but if I really felt I had to, I could, without hesitation, blow a man away.

* * *

Do you know the story of Ferdinand the bull? It was my childhood favorite. Ferdinand doesn't care to butt heads and compete with the other bulls, or to dream about fighting the matadors. He prefers to sit alone beneath a tree, smelling the flowers. On the very day that five men in funny hats come to find the fiercest bull to fight in the ring, a bee stings Ferdinand, and the sting sends him sprinting and stomping and snorting about the field in an enraged huff. The men, impressed by his vigor, catch him and take him to Madrid. Ferdinand enters the arena. But he refuses to fight. Instead, he sits in the center of the ring, smelling the flowers tucked in the ladies' hair. Does he even know where he is? The men in funny hats return him to his pasture, and at the end of the book he is once again beneath his tree, idyllically, smelling flowers, as if the moment in the arena had never happened, as if charging the picadors and the matador in retaliation for their spearing and prodding were beyond all imagining, beyond all possibility. Beneath his tree, smelling flowers, living a calf's life, happily ever after.

Isn't it pretty to think so? □