

**APRIL 27**

# Iraq: War, aid and public relations

**A**merican news outlets provided extensive – and mostly laudatory – coverage of Marla Ruzicka after she died in Baghdad on April 16. The humanitarian aid worker's undaunted spirit and boundless dedication had endeared her to a wide array of people as she strived to gain acknowledgment and compensation for civilians harmed by the war in Iraq.

Ruzicka was determined to help Iraqi victims and loved ones. "Their tragedies," she said, "are our responsibilities." Her funeral, at a church in her hometown of Lakeport, Calif., was a moving occasion as friends and co-workers paid tribute to a woman whose moral energies led her to take great risks and accomplish so much in a life of 28 years.

By all accounts, she was a wonderful and inspiring person. Yet after I left the funeral, some key themes of the media eulogies and other testimonials kept bothering me. We were being encouraged to celebrate Marla Ruzicka's life, her work and her message. But – in the context of a continuing war – what was her message?

There may be no more succinct summary than the words that Ruzicka wrote just days before she died, in an article published posthumously with a Baghdad dateline in USA Today: "In my dealings with U.S. military officials here, they have shown regret and remorse for the deaths and injuries of civilians. Systematically recording and publicly releasing civilian casualty numbers would assist in helping the victims who survive to piece their lives back together."

During the last two years of her life, Ruzicka found an accommodation with the American military. In sharp contrast to previous antiwar activism, she didn't oppose the U.S. war in Iraq. "I decided not to take a position on the war but to try to do the right humanitarian thing," she told the San Francisco Chronicle in December 2003. Increasingly, she found common ground with the Pentagon.

Humanitarian principles and justice certainly demand "compensation" for the wounded and for families of the dead. Such measures are morally right – but woefully insufficient. We should never forget that it is impossible to truly compensate for a

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life that has been taken. Solutions require a halt to the wounding and killing, not just fulfillment of financial obligations after each tragedy.

In the United States, the mainstream news coverage of Marla Ruzicka would not have been so favorable if she had been a vocal opponent of the U.S. military occupation during the past two years. It was not only Ruzicka's warmth and charm that endeared her to American generals in Baghdad and policymakers in Washington. It was also the reality that her work came to be understood as pragmatically helpful to the war effort.

Five days after Ruzicka died, Philadelphia Inquirer columnist Trudy Rubin wrote: "Civilian casualties are an inconvenient stain on the story line of Iraq liberation." The column went on: "Ruzicka understood that helping civilian victims is not just the right thing to do, but also is militarily essential." When Iraqi civilians die from Pentagon firepower, the deaths stir emotions "that will make young men think about attacking U.S. soldiers."

After Ruzicka's funeral, the Los Angeles Times noted that "her efforts, carried in Congress by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), resulted in an unprecedented \$30 million in aid to victims." But Congress has just put about \$80 billion more into the war pipeline, and there's a lot more of such supplemental funding on the horizon. Today, the formula in place provides for millions of dollars to "compensate" for deaths and wounds inflicted on Iraqi people – and billions of dollars to keep killing and wounding them.

This spring, before and after her death, Ruzicka's work was instrumental in exposing the fact that – contrary to Washington's longtime claims – the U.S. military has been quietly documenting many of the Iraqi civilian deaths caused by the Pentagon's forces. Is the emergence of this information a step in the right direction? Yes. But at the same time, media spin promotes the illusion that the U.S. war effort in Iraq is becoming ever-more compassionate and life-affirming. Such story lines are good public relations for a massive U.S. military operation that continues to injure and kill more Iraqi people.

*Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer. His columns and other writings can be found at: [www.normansolomon.com](http://www.normansolomon.com)*

