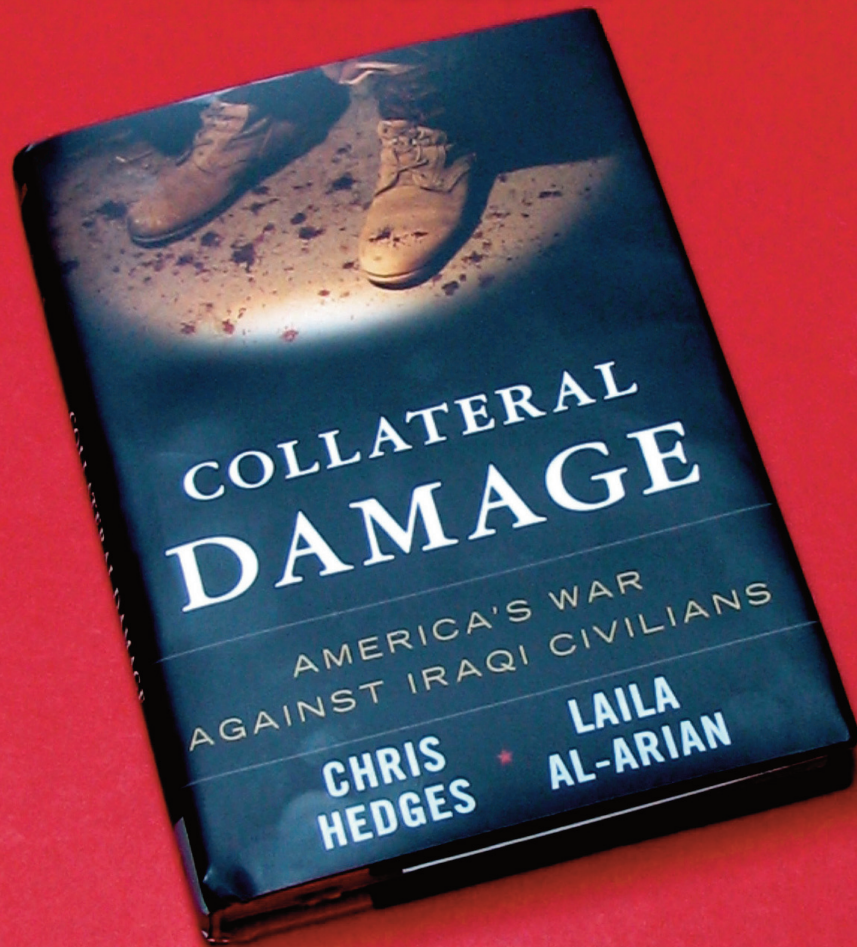


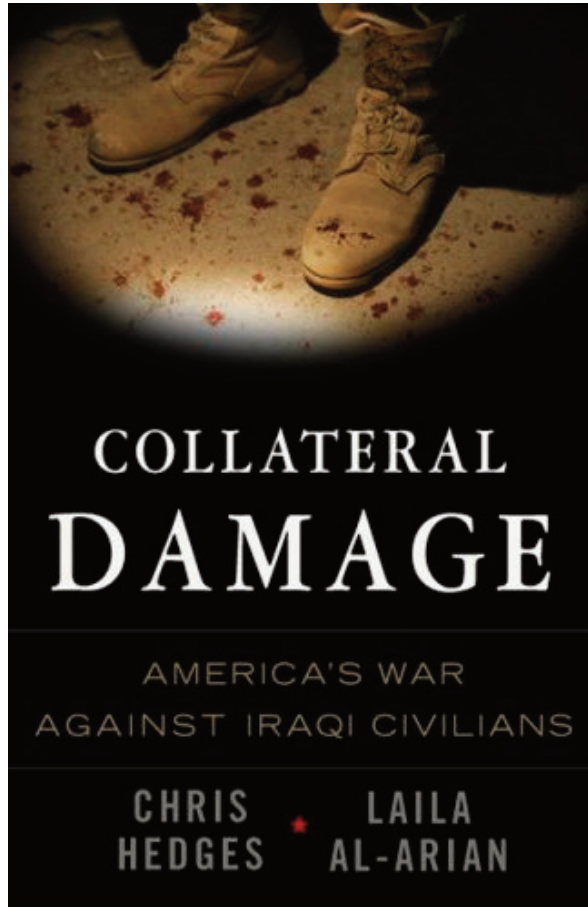
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**WHEN AMERICA
GOES TO WAR**

Chris Hedges



This is an adapted version of the introduction to the just-published book, **Collateral Damage: America's War Against Iraqi Civilians**, by Chris Hedges and Laila al-Arian, published by Nation Books (\$22.95).

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WHEN AMERICA GOES TO WAR

An excerpt from the new book
Collateral Damage

BY CHRIS HEDGES

Troops, when they battle insurgent forces, as in Iraq, or Gaza or Vietnam, are placed in “atrocious producing situations.” Being surrounded by a hostile population makes simple acts, such as going to a store to buy a can of Coke, dangerous. The fear and stress push troops to view everyone around them as the enemy. The hostility is compounded when the enemy, as in Iraq, is elusive, shadowy and hard to find. The rage soldiers feel after a roadside bomb explodes, killing or maiming their comrades, is one that is easily directed, over time, to innocent civilians who are seen to support the insurgents.

Civilians and combatants, in the eyes of the beleaguered troops, merge into one entity. These civilians, who rarely interact with soldiers or Marines, are to most of the occupation troops in Iraq nameless, faceless, and easily turned into abstractions of hate. They are dismissed as less than human. It is a short psychological leap, but a massive moral leap. It is a leap from killing — the shooting of someone who has the capacity to do you harm — to murder — the deadly assault against someone who can-

The suicides, as they did in the Vietnam War years, will only rise as distraught veterans come home, unwrap the self-protective layers of cotton wool that keep them from feeling, and face the awful reality of what they did to innocents in Iraq

not harm you.

The war in Iraq is now primarily about murder. There is very little killing. The savagery and brutality of the occupation is tearing apart those who have been deployed to Iraq. As news reports have just informed us, 115 American soldiers committed suicide in 2007. This is a 13% increase in suicides over 2006. And the suicides, as they did in the Vietnam War years, will only rise as distraught veterans come home, unwrap the self-protective layers of cotton wool that keep them from feeling, and face the awful reality of what they did to innocents in Iraq

American Marines and soldiers have become socialized to atrocity. The killing project is not described in these terms to a distant public. The politicians still speak in the abstract terms of glory, honor, and heroism, in the necessity of improving the world, in lofty phrases of political and spiritual renewal. Those who kill large numbers of people always claim it as a virtue. The campaign to rid the world of terror is expressed within the confines of this rhetoric, as if once all terrorists are destroyed evil itself will vanish.

The reality behind the myth, however, is very different. The reality and the ideal tragically clash when soldiers and Marines return home. These combat veterans are often alienated from the world around them, a world that still believes in the myth of war and the virtues of the nation. They confront the grave, existential crisis of all who go through combat and understand that we have no monopoly on virtue, that in war we become as barbaric and savage as those we oppose.

This is a profound crisis of faith. It shatters the myths, national and religious, that these young men and women were fed before they left for Iraq. In short, they uncover the lie they have been told. Their relationship with the nation will never be the same. These veterans give us a true narrative of the war — one that exposes the vast enterprise of industrial slaughter unleashed in Iraq. They expose the lie.

War as Betrayal

“This unit sets up this traffic control point, and this 18 year-old kid is on top of an armored Humvee with a .50-caliber machine gun,” remembered Sgt. Geoffrey Millard, who served in Tikrit with the 42nd Infantry Division. “And this car speeds at him pretty quick and he makes a split-second decision that that’s a suicide bomber, and he presses the butterfly trigger and puts two hundred rounds in less than a minute into this vehicle. It killed the mother, a father, and two kids. The boy was aged four and the daughter was aged three.

“And they briefed this to the general,” Millard said, “and they briefed it gruesome. I mean, they had pictures. They briefed it to him. And this colonel turns

War is always about betrayal: betrayal of the young by the old, of idealists by cynics, and of troops by politicians. This bitter knowledge of betrayal has seeped into the ranks of America's Iraq War veterans

around to this full division staff and says, ‘If these f—ing hajis learned to drive, this sh-t wouldn’t happen.’“

Millard and tens of thousands of other veterans suffer not only delayed reactions to stress but this crisis of faith. The God they knew, or thought they knew, failed them. The church or the synagogue or the mosque, which promised redemption by serving God and country, did not prepare them for the awful betrayal of this civic religion, for the capacity we all have for human atrocity, for the stories of heroism used to mask the reality of war.

War is always about betrayal: betrayal of the young by the old, of idealists by cynics, and of troops by politicians. This bitter knowledge of betrayal has seeped into the ranks of America’s Iraq War veterans. It has unleashed a new wave of disillusioned veterans not seen since the Vietnam War. It has made it possible for us to begin, again, to see war’s death mask and understand our complicity in evil.

“And then, you know, my sort of sentiment of, ‘What the f— are we doing, that I felt that way in Iraq,’” said Sgt. Ben Flanders, who estimated that he ran hundreds of military convoys in Iraq. “It’s the sort of insanity of it and the fact that it reduces it. Well, I think war does anyway, but I felt like there was this enormous reduction in my compassion for people. The only thing that wound up mattering is myself and the guys that I was with. And everybody else be damned, whether you are an Iraqi — I’m sorry, I’m sorry you live here, I’m sorry this is a terrible situation, and I’m sorry that you have to deal with all of, you know, army vehicles running around and shooting, and these insurgents and all this stuff.”

The Hobbesian world of Iraq described

by Flanders is one where the ethic is kill or be killed. All nuance and distinction vanished for him. He fell, like most of the occupation troops, into a binary world of us and them, the good and the bad, those worthy of life and those unworthy of life. The vast majority of Iraqi civilians, caught in the middle of the clash among militias, death squads, criminal gangs, foreign fighters, kidnapping rings, terrorists, and heavily armed occupation troops, were just one more impediment that, if they happened to get in the way, had to be eradicated. These Iraqis were no longer human. They were abstractions in human form.

“The first briefing you get when you get off the plane in Kuwait, and you get off the plane and you’re holding a duffel bag in each hand,” Millard remembered. “You’ve got your weapon slung. You’ve got a web sack on your back. You’re dying of heat. You’re tired. You’re jet-lagged. Your mind is just full of goop. And then you’re scared on top of that, because, you know, you’re in Kuwait, you’re not in the States anymore... So fear sets in, too. And they sit you into this little briefing room and you get this briefing about how, you know, you can’t trust any of these f—ing hajis, because all these f—king hajis are going to kill you. And ‘haji’ is always used as a term of disrespect and usually with the F-word in front of it.”

The press coverage of the war in Iraq rarely exposes the twisted pathology of this war. We see the war from the perspective of the troops or from the equally skewed perspective of the foreign reporters, holed up in hotels, hemmed in by drivers and translators and official security and military escorts. There are moments when war’s face appears to these voyeurs and professional killers, perhaps from the

The cable news shows that packaged and sold us the war have stopped covering it, trading the awful carnage of bomb blasts in Baghdad for the soap-opera sagas of Roger Clemens, Miley Cyrus, and Britney Spears in her eternal meltdown

back seat of a car where a small child, her brains oozing out of her head, lies dying, but mostly it remains hidden. And all our knowledge of the war in Iraq has to be viewed as lacking the sweep and depth that will come one day, perhaps years from now, when a small Iraqi boy reaches adulthood and unfolds for us the sad and tragic story of the invasion and bloody occupation of his nation.

As the war sours, as it no longer fits into the mythical narrative of us as liberators and victors, it fades from view. The cable news shows that packaged and sold us the war have stopped covering it, trading the awful carnage of bomb blasts in Baghdad for the soap-opera sagas of Roger Clemens, Miley Cyrus, and Britney Spears in her eternal meltdown. Average monthly coverage of the war in Iraq on the ABC, NBC, and CBS newscasts combined has been cut in half, falling from 388 minutes in 2003, to 274 in 2004, to 166 in 2005. And newspapers, including papers like the Boston Globe, have shut down their Baghdad bureaus. Deprived of a clear, heroic narrative, restricted and hemmed in by security concerns, they have walked away.

Most reporters know that the invasion and the occupation have been a catastrophe. They know the Iraqis do not want us. They know about the cooked intelligence, spoon-fed to a compliant press by the Office of Special Plans and Lewis Libby’s White House Iraq Group. They know about Curveball, the forged documents out of Niger, the ousted CIA operatives, and the bogus British intelligence dossiers that were taken from old magazine articles. They know the weapons of mass destruction were destroyed long before we arrived. They know that our military as well as our National Guard and reserve

units are being degraded and decimated. They know this war is not about bringing democracy to Iraq, that all the clichés about staying the course and completing the mission are used to make sure the president and his allies do not pay a political price while in power for their blunders and their folly.

The press knows all this, and if reporters had bothered to look they could have known it a long time ago. But the press, or at least most of it, has lost the passion, the outrage, and the sense of mission that once drove reporters to defy authority and tell the truth.

The Legions of the Lost and Damned

War is the pornography of violence. It has a dark beauty, filled with the monstrous and the grotesque. The Bible calls it “the lust of the eye” and warns believers against it. War allows us to engage in lusts and passions we keep hidden in the deepest, most private interiors of our fantasy lives. It allows us to destroy not only things and ideas but human beings.

In that moment of wholesale destruction, we wield the power of the divine, the power to revoke another person’s charter to live on this Earth. The frenzy of this destruction – and when unit discipline breaks down, or when there was no unit discipline to begin with, “frenzy” is the right word – sees armed bands crazed by the poisonous elixir that our power to bring about the obliteration of others delivers. All things, including human beings, become objects – objects either to gratify or destroy, or both. Almost no one is immune. The contagion of the crowd sees to that.

Human beings are machine-gunned

Human beings are machine-gunned and bombed from the air, automatic grenade launchers pepper hovels and neighbors with high-powered explosive devices, and convoys race through Iraq like freight trains of death

and bombed from the air, automatic grenade launchers pepper hovels and neighbors with high-powered explosive devices, and convoys race through Iraq like freight trains of death. These soldiers and Marines have at their fingertips the heady ability to call in airstrikes and firepower that obliterate landscapes and villages in fiery infernos. They can instantly give or deprive human life, and with this power they become sick and demented. The moral universe is turned upside down. All human beings are used as objects. And no one walks away uninfected.

War thrusts us into a vortex of pain and fleeting ecstasy. It thrusts us into a world where law is of little consequence, human life is cheap, and the gratification of the moment becomes the overriding desire that must be satiated, even at the cost of another’s dignity or life.

“A lot of guys really supported that whole concept that, you know, if they don’t speak English and they have darker skin, they’re not as human as us, so we can do what we want,” said Spc. Josh Middleton, who served in the 82nd Airborne in Iraq. “And you know, 20 year-old kids are yelled at back and forth at Bragg, and we’re picking up cigarette butts and getting yelled at every day for having a dirty weapon. But over here, it’s like life and death. And 40 year-old Iraqi men look at us with fear and we can – do you know what I mean? – we have this power that you can’t have. That’s really liberating. Life is just knocked down to this primal level of, you know, you worry about where the next food’s going to come from, the next sleep or the next patrol, and to stay alive.

“It’s like, you feel like, I don’t know, if you’re a caveman,” he added. “Do you know what I mean? Just, you know, I

mean, this is how life is supposed to be. Life and death, essentially. No TV. None of that bullsh-t.”

It takes little in wartime to turn ordinary men into killers. Most give themselves willingly to the seduction of unlimited power to destroy. All feel the peer pressure to conform. Few, once in battle, find the strength to resist. Physical courage is common on a battlefield. Moral courage, which these veterans have exhibited by telling us the truth about the war, is not.

Military machines and state bureaucracies, which seek to make us obey, seek also to silence those who return from war and speak to its reality. They push aside these witnesses to hide from a public eager for stories of war that fit the mythic narrative of glory and heroism the essence of war, which is death. War, as these veterans explain, exposes the capacity for evil that lurks just below the surface within all of us. This is the truth these veterans, often with great pain, have had to face.

The historian Christopher Browning chronicled the willingness to kill in *Ordinary Men*, his study of Reserve Police Battalion 101 in Poland during World War II. On the morning of July 12, 1942, the battalion, made up of middle-aged recruits, was ordered to shoot 1,800 Jews in the village of Józefów in a daylong action. The men in the unit had to round up the Jews, march them into the forest, and one by one order them to lie down in a row. The victims, including women, infants, children, and the elderly, were shot dead at close range.

Battalion members were offered the option to refuse, an option only about a dozen men took, although a few more asked to be relieved once the killing began. Those who did not want to continue, Browning says, were disgusted rather than

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plagued by conscience. When the men returned to the barracks they “were depressed, angered, embittered and shaken.” They drank heavily. They were told not to talk about the event, “but they needed no encouragement in that direction.”

Each generation responds to war as innocents. Each generation discovers its own disillusionment, often at a terrible personal price. And the war in Iraq has begun to produce legions of the lost and the damned, many of whom battle the emotional and physical trauma that comes from killing and exposure to violence.

Punishing the Local Population

Sgt. Camilo Mejía, who eventually applied while still on active duty to become a conscientious objector, said the ugly side of American racism and chauvinism appeared the moment his unit arrived in the Middle East. Fellow soldiers instantly ridiculed Arab-style toilets because they would be “sh-tting like dogs.” The troops around him treated Iraqis, whose language they did not speak and whose culture was alien, little better than animals.

The word “haji” swiftly became a slur to refer to Iraqis, in much the same way “gook” was used to debase the Vietnamese and “raghead” is used to belittle those in Afghanistan. Soon those around him ridiculed “haji food,” “haji homes,” and “haji music.” Bewildered prisoners, who were rounded up in useless and indiscriminate raids, were stripped naked and left to stand terrified for hours in the baking sun. They were subjected to a steady torrent of verbal and physical abuse. “I experienced horrible confusion,” Mejía remembered, “not knowing whether I was more afraid for the detainees or for what

would happen to me if I did anything to help them.”

These scenes of abuse, which began immediately after the American invasion, were little more than collective acts of sadism. Mejía watched, not daring to intervene yet increasingly disgusted at the treatment of Iraqi civilians. He saw how the callous and unchecked abuse of power first led to alienation among Iraqis and spawned a raw hatred of the occupation forces. When Army units raided homes, the soldiers burst in on frightened families, forced them to huddle in the corners at gunpoint, and helped themselves to food and items in the house.

“After we arrested drivers,” he recalled, “we would choose whichever vehicles we liked, fuel them from confiscated jerry cans, and conduct undercover presence patrols in the impounded cars.

“But to this day I cannot find a single good answer as to why I stood by idly during the abuse of those prisoners except, of course, my own cowardice,” he also noted.

Iraqi families were routinely fired upon for getting too close to checkpoints, including an incident where an unarmed father driving a car was decapitated by a .50-caliber machine gun in front of his small son. Soldiers shot holes into cans of gasoline being sold alongside the road and then tossed incendiary grenades into the pools to set them ablaze. “It’s fun to shoot s-h-t up,” a soldier said. Some opened fire on small children throwing rocks. And when improvised explosive devices (IEDS) went off, the troops fired wildly into densely populated neighborhoods, leaving behind innocent victims who became, in the callous language of war, “collateral damage.”

“We would drive on the wrong side of

Iraqi families were routinely fired upon for getting too close to checkpoints, including an incident where an unarmed father driving a car was decapitated by a .50-caliber machine gun in front of his small son

the highway to reduce the risk of being hit by an IED,” Mejía said of the deadly roadside bombs. “This forced oncoming vehicles to move to one side of the road and considerably slowed down the flow of traffic. In order to avoid being held up in traffic jams, where someone could roll a grenade under our trucks, we would simply drive up on sidewalks, running over garbage cans and even hitting civilian vehicles to push them out of the way. Many of the soldiers would laugh and shriek at these tactics.”

At one point the unit was surrounded by an angry crowd protesting the occupation. Mejía and his squad opened fire on an Iraqi holding a grenade, riddling the man’s body with bullets. Mejía checked his clip afterward and determined that he had fired 11 rounds into the young man. Units, he said, nonchalantly opened fire in crowded neighborhoods with heavy M-240 Bravo machine guns, AT-4 launchers, and Mark 19s, a machine gun that spits out grenades.

“The frustration that resulted from our inability to get back at those who were attacking us,” Mejía said, “led to tactics that seemed designed simply to punish the local population that was supporting them.”

The Algebra of Occupation

It is the anonymity of the enemy that fuels the mounting rage. Comrades are maimed or die, and there is no one to lash back at, unless it is the hapless civilians who happen to live in the neighborhood where the explosion or ambush occurred. Soldiers and Marines can do two or three tours in Iraq and never actually see the enemy, although their units come under attack and take numerous casualties. These

troops, who entered Baghdad in triumph when Iraq was occupied, soon saw the decisive victory over Saddam Hussein's army evolve into a messy war of attrition.

The superior firepower and lightning victory was canceled out by what T. E. Lawrence once called the "algebra of occupation." Writing about the British occupation of Iraq following the Ottoman Empire's collapse in World War I, Lawrence, in lessons these veterans have had to learn on their own, highlighted what has always doomed conventional, foreign occupying powers.

"Rebellion must have an unassailable base... it must have a sophisticated alien enemy, in the form of a disciplined army of occupation too small to dominate the whole area effectively from fortified posts," Lawrence wrote. "It must have a friendly population, not actively friendly, but sympathetic to the point of not betraying rebel movements to the enemy. Rebellions can be made by 2 percent active in a striking force, and 98 percent passive sympathy. Granted mobility, security... time and doctrine... victory will rest with the insurgents, for the algebraical factors are in the end decisive."

The failure in Iraq is the same failure that bedeviled the French in Algeria; the United States in Vietnam; and the British, who for 800 years beat, imprisoned, transported, shot, and hanged hundreds of thousands of Irish patriots. Occupation, in each case, turned the occupiers into beasts and fed the insurrection. It created patterns where innocents, as in Iraq, were terrorized and killed. The campaign against a mostly invisible enemy, many veterans said, has given rise to a culture of terror and hatred among U.S. forces, many of whom, losing ground, have in effect de-

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clared war on all Iraqis.

Mejía said, regarding the deaths of Iraqis at checkpoints, "This sort of killing of civilians has long ceased to arouse much interest or even comment."

Mejía also watched soldiers from his unit abuse the corpses of Iraqi dead. He related how, in one incident, soldiers laughed as an Iraqi corpse fell from the back of a truck. "Take a picture of me and this motherf---er," said one of the soldiers who had been in Mejía's squad in Third Platoon, putting his arm around the corpse.

The shroud fell away from the body, revealing a young man wearing only his pants. There was a bullet hole in his chest.

"Damn, they really f---ed you up, didn't they?" the soldier laughed.

The scene, Mejía noted, was witnessed by the dead man's brothers and cousins.

The senior officers, protected in heavily fortified compounds, rarely experienced combat. They sent their troops on futile missions in the quest to be awarded Combat Infantry Badges. This recognition, Mejía noted, "was essential to their further progress up the officer ranks."

This pattern meant that "very few high-ranking officers actually got out into the action, and lower-ranking officers were afraid to contradict them when they were wrong." When the badges – bearing an emblem of a musket with the hammer dropped, resting on top of an oak wreath – were finally awarded, the commanders brought in Iraqi tailors to sew the badges on the left breast pockets of their desert combat uniforms.

"This was one occasion when our leaders led from the front," Mejía noted bitterly. "They were among the first to visit the tailors to get their little patches of glory sewn next to their hearts."

War breeds gratuitous, senseless, and repeated acts of atrocity and violence. Abuse of the powerless becomes a kind of perverted sport for the troops.

“I mean, if someone has a fan, they’re a white-collar family,” said Spc. Philip Chrystal, who carried out raids on Iraqi homes in Kirkuk. “So we get started on this day, this one, in particular. And it starts with the psy-ops [psychological operations] vehicles out there, you know, with the big speakers playing a message in Arabic or Farsi or Kurdish or whatever they happen to be saying, basically, saying put your weapons, if you have them, next to the front door in your house. Please come outside, blah, blah, blah, blah. And we had Apaches flying over for security, if they’re needed, and it’s also a good show of force. And we were running around, and we’d done a few houses by this point, and I was with my platoon leader, my squad leader, and maybe a couple other people, but I don’t really remember.

“And we were approaching this one house, and this farming area; they’re, like, built up into little courtyards,” he said. “So they have like the main house, common area. They have like a kitchen and then they have like a storage-shed-type deal. And we were approaching, and they had a family dog. And it was barking ferociously, because it was doing its job. And my squad leader, just out of nowhere, just shoots it. And he didn’t – motherf—er – he shot it, and it went in the jaw and exited out.

“So I see this dog – and I’m a huge animal lover. I love animals – and this dog has like these eyes on it, and he’s running around spraying blood all over the place. And the family is sitting right there, with three little children and a mom and a dad

The vanquished know the essence of war – death. They grasp that war is necrophilia. They see that war is a state of almost pure sin, with its goals of hatred and destruction

horrified. And I’m at a loss for words. And so I yell at him. I’m like, ‘What the f— are you doing?’ And so the dog’s yelping. It’s crying out without a jaw. And I’m looking at the family, and they’re just scared. And so I told them, I was like, ‘F—ing shoot it,’ you know. ‘At least kill it, because that can’t be fixed. It’s suffering.’ And I actually get tears from just saying this right now, but – and I had tears then, too – and I’m looking at the kids and they are so scared. So I got the interpreter over with me and I get my wallet out and I gave them twenty bucks, because that’s what I had. And, you know, I had him give it to them and told them that I’m so sorry that asshole did that. Which was very common.

“Was a report ever filed about it?” he asked. “Was anything ever done? Any punishment ever dished out? No, absolutely not.”

The Plaster Saints of War

The vanquished know war. They see through the empty jingoism of those who use the abstract words of “glory,” “honor,” and “patriotism” to mask the cries of the wounded, the brutal killing, war profiteering, and chest-pounding grief. They know the lies the victors often do not acknowledge, the lies covered up in stately war memorials and mythic war narratives, filled with stories of courage and comradeship. They know the lies that permeate the thick, self-important memoirs by amoral statesmen who make wars but do not know war.

The vanquished know the essence of war – death. They grasp that war is necrophilia. They see that war is a state of almost pure sin, with its goals of hatred and destruction. They know how war fos-

ters alienation, leads inevitably to nihilism, and is a turning away from the sanctity and preservation of life. All other narratives about war too easily fall prey to the allure and seductiveness of violence as well as the attraction of the godlike power that comes with the license to kill with impunity.

But the words of the vanquished come later, sometimes long after the war, when grown men and women unpack the suffering they endured as children: what it was like to see their mother or father killed or taken away, or what it was like to lose their homes, their community, their security, and to be discarded as human refuse. But by then few listen. The truth about war comes out, but usually too late. We are assured by the war-makers that these stories have no bearing on the glorious violent enterprise the nation is about to inaugurate. And, lapping up the myth of war and its sense of empowerment, we prefer not to look.

We are trapped in a doomed war of attrition in Iraq. We have blundered into a nation we know little about, caught in bitter rivalries between competing ethnic and religious groups. Iraq was a cesspool for the British in 1917 when they occupied it. It will be a cesspool for us as well. We have embarked on an occupation that is as damaging to our souls as to our prestige and power and security. We have become tyrants to others weaker than ourselves.

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And we believe, falsely, that because we have the capacity to wage war we have the right to wage war.

We make our heroes out of clay. We laud their gallant deeds and give them uniforms with colored ribbons on their chests for the acts of violence they committed or endured. They are our false repositories of glory and honor, of power, of self-righteousness, of patriotism and self-worship, all that we want to believe about ourselves. They are our plaster saints of war, the icons we cheer to defend us and make us and our nation great. They are the props of our civic religion, our love of power and force, our belief in our right as a chosen nation to wield this force against the weak, and rule. This is our nation's idolatry of itself. And this idolatry has corrupted religious institutions, not only here but in most nations, making it impossible for us to separate the will of God from the will of the state.

Prophets are not those who speak of piety and duty from pulpits – few people in pulpits have much worth listening to – but are the battered wrecks of men and women who return from Iraq and speak the halting words we do not want to hear, words that we must listen to and heed to know ourselves. They tell us war is a soulless void. They have seen and tasted how war plunges us into perversion, trauma, and an unchecked orgy of death. And it is their testimonies that have the redemptive

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