

JULY 29

In praise of Kevin Benderman

Before being sentenced to 15 months for refusing to return to Iraq with his Army unit, Sgt. Kevin Benderman told a military judge that he acted with his conscience, not out of a disregard for duty," the Associated Press reports. Benderman, a 40-year-old Army mechanic, "refused to go on a second combat tour in January, saying the destruction and misery he witnessed during the 2003 Iraq invasion had turned him against war."

Three weeks ago, his wife Monica Benderman wrote: "He returned knowing that war is wrong, the most dehumanizing creation of humanity that exists. He saw war destroy civilians, innocent men, women and children. He saw war destroy homes, relationships and a country. He saw this not only in the country that was invaded, but he saw this happening to the invading country as well – and he knew that the only way to save those soldiers was for people to no longer participate in war. Sgt. Kevin Benderman is a Conscientious Objector to war, and the Army is mad."

On Thursday, at his court-martial, Kevin Benderman spoke. "Though some might take my actions as being against soldiers, I want everyone to be home and safe and raising their families," he said. "I don't want anyone to be hurt in a combat zone."

But the Pentagon is imposing its power to enforce the unconscionable. And words that were written by Monica Benderman in early July are now even more true: "The Army has removed itself so completely from its moral responsibility, that its representatives are willing to openly demand, in a court of law, that they be allowed to regain 'positive control over this soldier' by finding him guilty of crimes he did not commit, and put him in jail – a prisoner of conscience, for daring to obey a moral law."

And, she added: "It is 'hard work' to face the truth, and it is scary when people who are not afraid to face it begin to speak out. Someone once said that my husband's case is a question of morality over legality. I pray that this country has not gone so far over the edge that the two are so distinctly different that we can tell them apart."

Monica Benderman is correct. Facing truths about the priorities of our country's government can be very difficult. During the Vietnam War – also based on lies, also

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methodically murderous – an extraordinary U.S. senator made the same basic point. "We're going to become guilty, in my judgment, of being the greatest threat to the peace of the world," Wayne Morse said at a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "It's an ugly reality, and we Americans don't like to face up to it."

Moments before the Senate hearing adjourned, on February 27, 1968, Morse said that he did not "intend to put the blood of this war on my hands." In the summer of 2005, while the horrors of the Iraq war continue, not a single United States senator is willing to speak with such moral clarity.

As an astute cliché says, truth is the first casualty of war. But another early casualty is conscience, routinely smothered in the national media echo chamber.

On the TV networks, the voices are usually smooth, and people often seem to be speaking loudly. In contrast, the human conscience is close to a whisper. Easily unheard.

Rarely explored in news media, the capacity for conscience makes us human. Out of all the differences between people and other animals, Darwin wrote, "the moral sense of conscience is by far the most important."

And that's why Kevin Benderman, now in prison, is providing greater moral leadership than any member of the United States Senate.

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Excerpts are posted at: www.WarMadeEasy.com