

Banality, bombast, and blood

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The saga of America's Private Lynch, no matter what the details of her movie-set escape prove to be, adds only banality to needless bloodshed in Iraq.

Another young American woman, Marla Ruzicka, went largely ignored. Ms. Ruzicka runs a non-profit organization that works to make accurate counts of a war's civilian dead. It is small wonder Ms. Ruzicka is not given the same coverage as Private Lynch, since, based upon detailed field work in Iraq, she says that between five and ten thousand civilians were killed.

Generally in wars, total casualties, which include wounded, crippled, and lost, are many times the number killed, often as high as ten times. I do not know what the appropriate ratio is for Iraq, but it's not hard to see that the United States killed and hurt a great many innocent people in a few weeks of „precision" war.

Of military losses, poor boys drafted to defend their homes, we as yet have no good estimate. In the first Gulf War, between sixty and one hundred thousand Iraqi soldiers were slaughtered. With Iraq's population being less than ten percent that of the United States, such losses must be multiplied by ten to get some feel for their impact on the society.

So while Americans, thirty years later, still weep at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington—a monument representing about sixty thousand deaths over ten years of war—they have inflicted on Iraq, in just three weeks, that same proportionate loss—all of them civilians. The one-sided slaughter of soldiers in the first Gulf War represented the equivalent of the U.S. having sustained between half a million and a million deaths just over a decade ago. No society recovers easily from such losses of its youth.

In a real war, a war in which most people agree there is some powerful motivating cause, the fate of an individual soldier like Private Lynch becomes almost unimportant. Soldiers in real wars are reduced to just about the status of soldier-ants in a war between two ant-nests.

But the public can be mercurial when it comes to invasions with flimsy excuses and gas-bag ideology. Public support can shift quickly or melt away entirely, so a little juicing-up may be prescribed. Besides, when there is almost no real news being reported, as was true in America for Iraq, you need a little something to satisfy the chips-and-television crowd anxious to be informed from their couches.

Since America's modern warriors are limited to follow-up after missiles and bombs have reduced everything to a vision of hell, much of the touching stuff that once inspired the home front is missing. There are no more pitiful and tragic images of young Americans falling in what seems a worthy cause.

So the Pentagon's prisoner-liberation simulation, like its staged statue-toppling in Baghdad, so suggestive of news photos at end of World War Two, served several purposes.

Is this how a great power behaves in the early part of the 21st century? Especially a power that enjoys reminding us at every opportunity—I suppose because it is so easy for the rest of the world, just watching its actions, to forget—that America stands for human rights and democratic principles? Yes, unfortunately, that is exactly how it behaves. Only, the complete picture is bleaker still.

Mr. Bush at the G-8 summit in Evian, France—a summit he considered not even attending and at which, in any event, he cut short his stay—made an effort at grand-poochbah statesman with "We can have disagreements, but that doesn't mean we have to be disagreeable," a lifelessly trite line, but one certainly ranking at the peak of this President's eloquence.

Just a few days before (May 30), Bush abandoned the session with reporters that customarily precedes a G-8 summit, perhaps reflecting advisors' concerns that he would blow it with his anger when questioned about recent events. He left the session for his tactful National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, to blow.

On the subject of Canada, Ms. Rice gave us the following: „I think there was disappointment in the United States that a friend like Canada was unable to support the United States in what we considered to be an extremely important issue for our security."

Does Ms. Rice read the newspaper? Her words about security come within days of reports of an interview with the Pentagon's Paul Wolfowitz in which he admits the business about

weapons was an excuse for invading Iraq. His admission only punctuated weeks of reports about American forces not finding anything remotely suspicious and America's hack chorus of national columnists swelling their breasts to a theme about weapons not being important after all.

Canada has never stinted in helping Americans. Canada is the kind of neighbor any sensible people would want. But helping a scheme for „regime change" in someone else's country, unsupported by international law, is not quite the same thing as helping Americans.

Canada was never called a poor friend for not helping in the many shadowy „regime changes" the United States has conducted across the Caribbean and Latin America. Canada's values and interests do not lie that way. Why was the situation suddenly so different for an unthreatening small country on the other side of the planet?

The tough answer is that the United States government felt alone and naked in what it was doing over Iraq. It desperately sought international approval, which it did not get, leaving the harsh ideologues in the White House both embarrassed and angry at being embarrassed.

Ms. Rice went on to say differences with Canada had put bilateral relations through "some difficult times," and "that disappointment will, of course, not go [away] easily. It will take some time, because when friends are in a position where we say our security's at stake, we would have thought, as we got from many of our friends, that the answer would have been, 'Well, how can we help?'"

Does any honest person reading her words find them in keeping with Bush's G-8 stuff about „not being disagreeable"? They are clearly disagreeable, provocative, and even petty.

But Ms. Rice went even further concerning Germany, „I can't answer the question of whether personal relations between the President and the Chancellor will ever be the same. We will have to see."

As for France, „there were times when it appeared that American power was seen to be more dangerous than perhaps Saddam Hussein," Ms. Rice said. "I'll just put it very bluntly, we simply didn't understand it."

Well, to put it also very bluntly, American power, when it is used to bully others, in fact is more dangerous, far more dangerous, than Saddam Hussein ever was.

„We have been allies in great struggles in world wars," Ms. Rice said of the French. "The United States gave its blood to liberate France."

The United States gave its blood to defeat rivals Germany and Japan. Liberating countries like France was incidental, although the French have always scrupulously, respectfully maintained America's battlefield cemeteries and commemorated America's efforts as few others do.

The historical fact is President Roosevelt considered governing postwar France in a very high-handed manner. He pretty much detested De Gaulle, and France's empire was something the Roosevelt people never stopped sneering at and preaching about while merrily working to build one of their own. The situation was far murkier and less heroic than Ms. Rice would have you understand, but her purpose was to put another country on the defensive, not to teach history.

Are the world's statesmen so dense they do not understand true danger when they see it? Do they deliberately embrace evil? Of course not. Then, why Ms. Rice's language if the need for invading Iraq was clear? Precisely because the need was not clear, and it has only become even less clear now. Manipulative language here is a substitute for thought—we are given a form of aggressive marketing rather than an honest product—a practice to which this administration is addicted.

Just a week before the G-8 summit, another Bush-administration bully, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, gave us his version of „not being disagreeable." Rumsfeld informed the French air force that it would not be welcome at two upcoming international exercises.

Rumsfeld's version of „not being disagreeable" included declaring that the United States would heavily cut its involvement with the Paris Air Show, traditionally the world's most important show for aviation technology. As a Pentagon official so agreeably put it, „With troops eating military rations in the dust in Iraq, it's not appropriate for officers to be wined and dined in Paris."

Doesn't that sound reasonable? So, do you think they've stopped wining and dining in expensive Georgetown restaurants over all the fat new Pentagon contracts being handed out these days? Or do they just quietly put aside that disagreeable stuff about dust and rations on

such happy occasions? Do you think they served military freeze-dried rations at the President's recent \$18-million dollar fundraiser?

America's top diplomat, that disappointing baritone of dissimulation, Colin Powell, has gone around for weeks uttering threats and slights towards France. A couple of weeks ago, he said the United States would reconsider its links with France following disagreement over Iraq. Does that sound anything like being „not disagreeable“?

On CBC Radio some weeks ago, there was a fascinating little story. There is a manufacturer in Quebec who actually makes some of the fancy cowboy boots beloved in Texas. During the height of American irritation over Iraq, this boot-maker was asked by his Texas customer to supply a written statement that he did not personally support Canada's policy towards war in Iraq.

Can you imagine an American's furious response at being asked such an inappropriate, private, personal matter in a business transaction? In effect, he was asked to supply a kind of pledge of allegiance to someone else's foreign policy.

Something corrupt, dirty, and destructive is taking hold of America, choking even ordinary business with the sewerage of ideology. How does one talk of neighborliness, love of freedom, or democratic-mindedness while behaving like a blackmailer?

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