

Our Army, Our America

Due to the positive reception of my first article I have been afforded the opportunity to write another. I have taken this opportunity to heart as I have come to feel an obligation to educate and enlighten everyone I can about our country's Army. Despite the fact that it is our Army, in a very real way many of us know nothing about it. Even more alarming is that except for the news, a war conducted on two major fronts would largely go unnoticed and unfelt by the general American public. It is to this end then that I write, in the hopes that all can gain a greater appreciation for what our men and women in uniform do. That which I write is in part opinion, in part fact. What it constitutes though are my truths, my understandings of the world as I have come to see it having the lens of serving in the Army and in Iraq.

On America

America has always maintained a confusing relationship with war. Inasmuch as we seem to abhor it, we constantly seem engaged in one. Our relationship to war has been and continues to be different than Europe has had. By virtue of our youth as a country, we generally have no national memory of hardship nor do we pass such memory down. Despite the Civil War, the Great Depression and WWII, despite Vietnam and the Cold War, in truth we have not let the past shape or shackle our thoughts or outlook on the future. While Europe has let the wars of Napoleon and Hitler continue to shape their collective consciousness, America has stayed relatively unburdened by its past.

By design America was founded on regarding the future and forgetting the past. The great historian Frederick Jackson Turner was able to identify this uniquely American characteristic at an early stage with what has been simply summed up over time as "Westward Ho!" Americans generally regard the past as inconsequential or indeterminate of our future while Europe has always allowed itself to be informed by its past heritage, its past glories.

Our lack of collective memory has manifested itself in an unwavering belief that Americans have the possibility to shape a better tomorrow, for ourselves and for others. Some would assert that this naïveté is dangerous but I still believe that it is this peculiarity in American thought that separates and elevates us.

On Winning the War

Many people ask me two questions: 1) do you agree with going to war in Iraq and 2) how can we win the war. As far as the first question is concerned, it is really not my place to decide as a Soldier. I execute the orders of my superior officers. As a private citizen I will say that I do believe in fighting this war. I believe in helping people when we can, wherever we can. That has always been the American ethic and my ethic. I also believe that in a very real sense, all wars are just to the Soldiers who fight them.

That being said it would seem like we have been climbing impossible odds. I don't think so. The average Iraqi actually enjoys having American Soldiers around. In general, we provide security, food, money, many things which Saddam never provided and certainly the terrorists will never provide. And while most insist we reduce our footprint, in Diyara my footprints were everywhere and everyone hoped that it would stay that way.

Ultimately, to think that thirty years of damage from Saddam can be reversed in only five years of U.S. involvement is naive. Institution building, substantive cultural change happens over generations, not days, weeks, or even years. It is not enough simply to fix schools, roads and

electricity without providing the people of Iraq the mechanisms to ensure that they can provide for those needs themselves.

On Institutions

Many look at the measure of success in Iraq is by a reducing the number of attacks. I've come to believe this is an erroneous benchmark. To try to eliminate IEDs would be to try and eliminate crime in America. It will never happen and should not be looked at as something other than a given which one might try to merely mitigate. The proper gauge of success is whether we are able to institution build.

Institutions, as I've come to define it, are based on two criteria: they are bigger than any one person, and the system outlasts the people who created them. Our Constitution, our economy, our rule of law, these are all institutions we enjoy. We know our institutions are healthy by the very cause of this present conflict: 9/11. Post 9/11, emergency services immediately addressed the scene, police investigated, and the government and economy continued to function the next day.

Iraq currently lacks these institutions. Their police, government, economy is weak and fragile. It is not a given that were a major crisis, such as a bombing, were to occur that Iraq would be able to demonstrate this same level of competency. However to achieve these goals it is necessary to create the security necessary for these institutions to develop and grow unfettered by the scourge of terrorism—hence the need for Coalition Forces.

On Politics

While seemingly antithetical to our American sense of fair play, in war there must be a winner. Not everyone can or should share a sense of victory. Wars are most effectively fought when overwhelming violence and decisiveness is bought to bear to create a swift, even if albeit untidy, victory. To that end, all stakeholders, citizens and Soldiers alike, must have the belief that the end state is winning, not a withdrawal.

If that is the case, then I have a hard time believing that everyone really does support the troops. To me supporting the troops means that you are willing to support whatever is necessary to win. You would never play a football game only committing resources for the first quarter and then spend the next three quarters figuring out whether we want to give resources to the coach for the rest of the game. Nor would we debate whether it is even worth playing the second half

Being a student of history I cannot help but feel that our withdrawal from Somalia has not somehow contributed to our current state of affairs. It created the perception that if enough enemy atrocities committed against Americans and American troops can be shown on CNN, then America would lose its resolve for seeing its cause through. I would like to believe that this is not true.

On Decisions

As an officer, my job is to make decisions; decision appropriate to the level of responsibility afforded me. Everyone at every level of responsibility is paid to make decisions, right up to the President. It is important for people to understand the decisions are made and managed by people and not machines. I really learned that from Iraq. In light of what people assert is mismanagement and lies I feel can largely be attributed to the decision making process.

As much as people want to think otherwise, the decisions made at levels high and low is simply done by people sitting around a table saying "should we or shouldn't we." For all our technology and understanding, that process has not changed. And for all our collective learning, the people

who make those decisions are really not that much different, not that much smarter or informed than us. In as much as we decide whether to take that second mortgage or not, leaders decided whether to invade countries or not. Facts and assumptions are reviewed. Questions are asked, opinions given. Decisions made.

In regards to my area of operations, the fact that certain operations did not pan out versus others could be attributed to a host of factors and had everything been successful, nothing would have been questioned. One must be willing to look at success and failure as givens and not necessarily something to fight or rebel against. It simply happens.

On Armor

Despite what is being said, there is no amount of armor that will protect you from an IED. The bigger the vehicle, the bigger the IED. That is the law of the land. In truth survivability is just as much tied to mobility as is armor. It does a Soldier no good to be laden down with armor if it leaves him no freedom of maneuver to escape.

Also I think Mr. Rumsfeld was correct in saying that you go to the war with the army you have not the army you want. Unfortunately most people do not see the need to actively resource and maintain a military during times of peace. People complain that the Army is too small and stretch too thin. They fail to realize that the Army post Gulf War was 18 divisions and was reduced to the 10 divisions of today because Congress reasoned that there was no need to keep such a large force with no credible military threats apparent. However, like in sports, sometimes the best defense is an aggressive offense.

On Hollywood

There is a general surprise in Hollywood that a single movie about the war in Iraq (Afghanistan is ignored) has yet to become a commercial success. However what Hollywood has failed to recognize is that no one wants to see a movie about Soldiers "gone bad" or Soldiers getting "bogged down in a quagmire," tropes which don't apply to any of the Soldiers I served with. Yet Hollywood seems intent of parading the "Vietnam" paradigm in every movie it has produced about Iraq.

The foul-mouthed, grizzled sergeant who yells at everybody. The bumbling reckless lieutenant who's the first to die. The chain of command that's so quick to send its men to die. The lost privates who get caught in between. There is a reason why Soldiers prefer to watch *Black Hawk Down* and *Saving Private Ryan*.

On a side note, here is the truth about photographs. If a picture shows the backs of Soldiers, then there is a good chance they were probably in danger. If the picture shows the faces of Soldiers, either they weren't really in danger, or the photographer has a death wish for standing between soldiers and a target.

On Being an Officer

I take great pride in being an officer in the United States Army. As much as we equate our professions with our self-identity, I do see myself, whether in civilian clothes or military uniform, always as a Soldier first. And when one deploys, sees just how big the Army is, how important Iraq is, one cannot help feeling a sense of the largesse, and the magnitude of what one is involved in.

I truly do believe in mission first, Soldiers always. Most people truly don't know what it means to take care of people. My job is to use our most precious resource, our country's sons and

daughters, and bring them into harm's way. I always promise my Soldiers that I will truly take care of them and provide them the most outstanding leadership that I can provide. That is my charge as an officer.

On Warriors

There is an idea that the knights of yore, the samurai of the days past no longer exist. The idea of a professional warrior dedicated to the profession of arms does not sit well with the American ideal. We feel that we are a peaceful people that are only slowly stirred to anger, and if provoked, swiftly and justly vanquish our enemies, allowing us to once again return to our peaceful ways. The fact is that we do have modern knights.

What we would imagine a modern day warrior to look like is generally different from reality. To me, a man like Master Sergeant Frazier (then a Sergeant First Class) is the modern day warrior. Married with two children, approaching forty, MSG Frazier has spent the majority of his adult life in the infantry, deploying to Haiti, Guantanamo Bay, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. By experience and through study, MSG Frazier is a wealth of knowledge on all things military, from history to tactics. While many may join the Army but serve the minimum commitment, it is men like him that dedicate their lives that allow the Army to function and maintain its pre-eminence in the world.

On Garrison

Contrary to popular belief, a Soldier doesn't just pick up a weapon and go to war. Soldiers must be trained. While this would seem to be self-evident, I feel the need to articulate this point as many have simply no idea what Soldiers actually do with their time.

On any given week, Soldiers are doing everything from performing vehicle and weapon maintenance, physical training (PT), weapons qualification, field exercises, command inspections, funeral details, mowing lawns, inventorying supplies, attending mandatory classes, preparing to move to another duty station, standing in formation, more PT, and in general getting ready to go to war. After all, war really means that We Are Ready.

In all this one must not forget the sacrifices that the families of Soldiers make. While Soldiers are away for field problems or deployments, spouses are left to raise the children, pay the bills, mark holidays, anniversaries and birthdays alone, and worry that their husband or wife is doing okay. It would be difficult to quantify the stress, the strain or the joy that is associated with being a military family. Rest assured it is not just the Soldier who signs up for the Army, it's the whole family.

On Training

When one joins the Army there are two "oh-no" moments as I call them. The first is that first day in the Army when one walks up and realizes that their life is no longer their own and they now belong to Uncle Sam. Then the "oh-no, what have I done" starts to sink in. The second "oh-no" happens after Basic Training. The whole time in Basic you are so focused on graduating that you forget that Basic Training is not the end but only the beginning of your military career. Then the "oh-no, I still have <insert number of years here> left" starts to sink in. Once you get over that second "oh-no" everything else falls into place.

One thing that a Soldier never gets over though is the cold. A Soldier can get accustomed to waking up early. A Soldier can get accustomed to hot temperatures, even Iraq hot. However, the one thing that will always, always defeat a Soldier is the cold. The Army has a particularly inventive way of issuing gloves and boots that never keep the hands or feet warm. And once the

hands and feet go, so does the rest of the body. There's cold, and then there's Army Cold. And I have not even mentioned the rain!

The one thing assured in the Army is that when it is a nice day outside, the Army will be sure to keep you inside. Also just the opposite is as true. Rare is the field problem that is met with fortuitous weather. Any true Soldier will tell you though that his greatest friend is B-O-B: big orange ball. Most civilians refer to Bob as the Sun.

On Letters

There are several things you never take from a Soldier: food, pay, and mail—mail especially because it's your outside connection to the world. There were many letters I received in Iraq but some were more special than others.

*Dear Americam Hero,
I hope you are ok in Kwwait and Iraq. I'm writeing you this litter because I want to thank you portecting me. I hope you will do well of all things. So have a great year of 2005. OH one more thing my Name is Sarah and my Last name is corn. I am eight and almost nine. I love to play many games. I have sixteen friends. I have an elven year old sister and a seven year old brother. I love many types of food and I Love sweets. I aslo Love to sing and dance. I aslo Love animals. I take horseback riding and I Love horses. My teaher is so nice and her name is Mrs. Dasinger and her helper Ms. Namein. My hole class is so nice too. I have nice family too. I go to Pomelo for my school.*

*From,
Sarah Corn*

For the record I preserved the original spelling from the letter. Any letter I would have written would have contained many more errors. This next one I actually received halfway during deployment. It meant more to me than any care package that could have been sent.

I really did not say much to you about you going to Iraq. The truth is, all your life I sought to teach you about choosing right instead of wrong. You are now a mature young man, and you have chosen to do not what is popular, but what is right. I have not told you in so many words, but I am very impressed with your choice to stand on the side of truth, and justice. I know it was not a decision that you made lightly. You are a born leader of men, who will guide others with good judgment; a quality trait I have observed from the time you were in elementary school. Being in Iraq is a reality no one could have prepared you to experience. Yet in all the ugliness, sadness, corruption, decay, and death, you and all the men and women in Iraq are a beam of LIGHT; a light directs the helpless, the weak, the forsaken, the abused to a new day of a future and a hope. A person must have strong conviction of righteousness to step in and help make right what was made wrong by others, so that people you have never met may walk the earth in the freedom of democracy, children may grow up to be mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers. I just wanted you to know, I am proud of the sacrifice you are making for your country, the country under which you have benefited so much. Now you are helping to establish and further democracy so that moms and dads and their children can experience the same goodness you

have known as a way of life. You are my son and I am deeply moved by what you are doing. I just want you to know that we love you and will always love you.

--A letter from my mom

On Healing

I have always been close to my friend Alex from the time we meet in high school. We are both from a mixed racial background; we could have been brothers. We both took the same classes in high school, played the same sports. He went to Princeton. He also decided to join the Army and go to Officer Candidate School. He also went to Iraq. I guess where we differ today is that he lost his leg to an IED in Iraq. In fact he almost lost both.

Quite frankly, in the past Alex would have probably died but he now represents the growing class of veterans who are now living despite having experienced a major trauma. And while his physical body is healing, it is even more remarkable how his mind has healed. Many people are surprised by the large majority of wounded veterans like Alex who not only have maintained a positive attitude about life but also about the Army. In fact he still has the desire to stay in the Army, and given the technology available, he still can.

I envy Alex. I envy him for the way he has been able to handle adversity, the way his family and friends have been able to rally around him. I envy Alex because while I don't think that Soldiers are always perfect, I truly do think he is a better man than most. One should admire a person who is able to sacrifice himself so unselfishly, and envy their ability do to so.

On Psychology

Overall I feel the reason why people enjoy reading first-person Soldier narratives is because many want to understand what the Army does and what war is like for the average Soldier. Even more fundamental though is the underlying question: could I do something like that myself? In truth the psychology of war is very simple to me: you are there so you have to do it. Plain and simple. Yes I fought for God and country; yes I fought for my fellow Soldiers. But in a very easy answer, I fought because I had to. And I fought because I believed in what I was doing.

I will say that there was and is always a part of me that sometimes extricates myself from the whole situation and begins to questions whether that is really me in that uniform with that rifle ready to actually use it on someone. Is that really me in a foreign country readying to throw myself at another to impose our national will? As I said, warfare is altogether seemingly ridiculous and at the same time altogether natural. It was in my compassion for humanity that I went to Iraq and in the process found my own.

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I am fortunate to say that I have been able to continue my adventures in the Army. I recently went to Egypt for a three week training exercise that over twelve countries participated in. Again I cannot begin to say how proud it made me to stand in uniform with the rest of my fellow Soldiers. It must be said though that while there were many there standing in different uniforms, there existed a common brotherhood between all of us. Perhaps it is the bond that exists between all men who have shared the joys and deprivation of a life in the service. That unspoken bond that thankfully men like Shakespeare and Ernie Pyle were able to command with the English language. I hope in some small way I have been able to carry on that legacy and bring illumination to what many go through but what even more know so little of.

The views expressed herein are of the author only and do not represent any official viewpoints sanctioned by the United States Army.

I request this essay to be published on the Lint Center for National Security Studies website with my name published.