

# Walking Wounded

## Old soldiers don't fade away

*by Fred Reed*

The observant will have noticed that we hear little from the troops in Iraq and see almost nothing of the wounded. Why, one might wonder, does not CNN put an enlisted Marine before a camera and, for 15 minutes without editing, let him say what he thinks? Is he not an adult and a citizen? Is he not engaged in important events on our behalf?

Sound political reasons exist. Soldiers are a risk PR-wise, the wounded a liability. No one can tell what they might say, and conspicuous dismemberment is bad for recruiting. An enlisted man in front of a camera is dangerous. He could wreck the governmental spin apparatus in five minutes. It is better to keep soldiers discreetly out of sight.

So we do not see much of the casualties, ours or theirs. Yet they are there, somewhere, with missing legs, blind, becoming accustomed to groping at things in their new darkness, learning to use the wheelchairs that will be theirs for 50 years. Some face worse fates than others. Quadriplegics will be warehoused in VA hospitals where nurses will turn them at intervals, like hamburgers, to prevent bedsores. Friends and relatives will soon forget them. Suicide will be a frequent thought. The less damaged will get around.

For a brief moment perhaps the casualties will believe, then try desperately to keep believing, that they did something brave and worthy and terribly important for that abstraction, country. Some will expect thanks. But there will be no thanks, or few, and those quickly forgotten. It will be worse. People will ask how they lost the leg. In Iraq, they will say, hoping for sympathy, or respect, or understanding. The response, often unvoiced but unmistakable, will be, "What did you do *that* for?" The wounded will realize that they are not only crippled, but freaks.

The years will go by. Iraq will fade into the mist. Wars always do. A generation will rise for whom it will be just history. The dismembered veterans will find first that almost nobody appreciates what they did, then that few even remember it. If—when, many would say—the United States is driven out of Iraq, the soldiers will look back and realize that the whole affair was a fraud. Wars are just wars. They seem important at the time. At any rate, we are told that they are important.

Yet the wounds will remain. Arms do not grow back. For the paralyzed there will never be girlfriends, dancing, rolling in the grass with children. The blind will adapt as best they can. Those with merely a missing leg will count themselves lucky. They will hobble about, managing to lead semi-normal lives, and people will say, "How well he handles it." An admirable freak. For others it will be less good. A colostomy bag is a sorry companion on a wedding night.

These men will come to hate. It will not be the Iraqis they hate. This we do not talk about.

It is hard to admit that one has been used. Some of the crippled will forever insist that the war was needed, that they were protecting their sisters from an Islamic invasion, or Vietnamese, or Chinese. Others will keep quiet and drink too much. Still others will read, grow older and wiser—and bitter. They will remember that their vice president, a man named Cheney, said that during his war, the one in Asia, he "had other priorities." The veterans will remember this when everyone else has long since forgotten Cheney.

I once watched the first meeting between a young Marine from the South, blind, much of his face shot away, and his high-school sweetheart, who had come from Tennessee to Bethesda Naval Hospital to see him.

Hatred comes easily. There are wounds and there are wounds. A friend of mine spent two tours in Asia in that war now little remembered. He killed many people, not all of them soldiers. It is what happens in wars. The memory haunts him. Jack is a hard man from a tough neighborhood, quick with his fists, intelligent but uneducated—not a liberal flower vain over his sensitivity. He lives in Mexican bars few would enter and has no politics beyond an anger toward government. He was not a joyous killer. He remembers what he did, knows now that he was had. It gnaws at him. One is wise to stay away from him when he is drinking.

People say that this war isn't like Vietnam. They are correct. Washington fights its war in Iraq with no better understanding of Iraq than it had of Vietnam, but with much better understanding of the United States. The Pentagon learned from Asia. This time around it has controlled the press well. Here is the great lesson of Southeast Asia: the press is dangerous, not because it is inaccurate, which it often is, but because it often isn't. So we don't much see the caskets —for reasons of privacy, you understand.

The war in Iraq is fought by volunteers, which means people that no one in power cares about. No one in the mysteriously named “elite” gives a damn about some kid from a town in Tennessee that has one gas station and a beer hall with a stuffed buck's head. Such a kid is a redneck at best, pretty much from another planet, and certainly not someone you would let your daughter date. If conscription came back, and college students with rich parents learned to live in fear of The Envelope, riots would blossom as before. Now Yale can rest easy. Thank God for throwaway people.

The nearly perfect separation between the military and the rest of the country, or at least the influential in the country, is wonderful for the war effort. It prevents concern. How many people with a college degree even know a soldier? Yes, some, and I will get e-mail from them, but they are a minority. How many Americans have been on a military base? Or, to be truly absurd, how many men in combat arms went to, say, Harvard? Ah, but they have other priorities.

In 15 years in Washington, I knew many, many reporters and intellectuals and educated people. Almost none had worn boots. So it is. Those who count do not have to go, and do not know anyone who has gone, and don't interest themselves. There is a price for this, though not one Washington cares about. Across America, in places where you might not expect it—in Legion halls and VFW posts, among those who carry membership cards from the Disabled American Veterans—there are men who hate. They don't hate America. They hate those who sent them. Talk to the wounded from Iraq in five years.

---

*Fred Reed's writing has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Harper's, and National Review, among other places.*