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The Cold Realities of Our Fight in Iraq

By Karl Zinsmeister

At the one-year anniversary of the war that removed Saddam Hussein and set Iraq and the rest of the Middle East on a dramatically new path, about 400 American men and women have been killed in action. Each of those lost sons or husbands or daughters is a source of heartache for their families, and for all Americans. They're also a reminder that, as the saying goes, "Freedom's not free."

Right back here in our own land, about 300 defenders of public safety (cops, firefighters, prison guards) sacrifice their lives every year in the process of protecting the domestic tranquility of our streets, homes, and gathering places. That's 3,000 traumas per decade, a bill paid less visibly than war deaths, but just as inexorably. Both sorts of losses are part of the blood price of keeping our civilization secure.

Those dead defenders are the reason all decent Americans stand, snatch off their hats, and place their hands on their hearts when old soldiers or officers of the peace walk down our streets at Memorial Day parades or July 4th celebrations. We honor those who bear physical risks for the rest of the country precisely because we know these are not theoretical dangers, but real perils that claim a considerable number of our bravest citizens each season.

The Americans who have given their lives in battle in Iraq aren't random victims. They were doing their duty in one of the great turning points of our generation.

I reached voting age about the time of the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979. What an excruciating episode that was: 52 Americans held against their will, publicly taunted and humiliated day after day, our government paralyzed. And that was just the opening salvo for a generation of Middle Eastern extremism. There was the Beirut barracks bombing that killed 243 Americans. Then the Berlin discotheque blast. The slaughter of 270 innocent people on the terrorist-downed Pan Am Flight 103, followed by hundreds more on other sabotaged airplanes. In 1990 came Iraq's rape of Kuwait, and the high costs in blood and treasure of reversing that dangerous thrust. Next was the first attempt to bring down the World Trade Center, in 1993, to which the U.S. made no effective response at all. Two months later the Iraqi plot to assassinate President Bush was uncovered. Then came the Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia, murdering American servicemen as they slept. Al-Qaeda killed 18 G.I.s in Mogadishu, then hundreds in the suicide bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa. The near-sinking of the *USS Cole* claimed 17 sailors and tens of millions of dollars. And, finally, the singeing, infuriating horror of September 11—with all the psychic, economic, and social trauma that followed.

Looking back, it's clear that we Americans were slow on the uptake, that we failed over and over to recognize that this was not a part of the world we could just ignore in the hope it would leave us alone. Only after repeated woundings, followed by one of the ugliest maulings Americans have suffered in their entire three-century history, did we realize that this is a chaotic, hate-filled, and violent region which urgently needs to be brought to order by more responsible forces.

Allowing the various zealots who populate the Middle East to continue their

maraudings against the rest of the world could, within a period of just a few years, lead to the sort of unimaginable holocaust that suicidal fanaticism and modern weapons are now able to produce in combination. International inspectors were taken aback in early 2004 by how far along the Libyan and Iranian nuclear programs were. At the same time we learned that the father of Pakistan's "Muslim Bomb" has been selling nuclear secrets even to psychopaths like North Korea's Kim Jong Il. What other surprises await?

A de-fanging of the Middle East would be an historical event of enormous consequence. And while transforming the Arab world is undeniably a difficult venture, it's no more unlikely than other conversions we've witnessed recently. In the early 1970s, there was a grand total of 40 democratic societies across the globe. Democracy, it was said, simply wouldn't grow in certain kinds of soil. Then stony lands like Portugal, Spain, Greece, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, nearly all of Latin America, all of Eastern Europe, and South Africa began to hold free elections for the first time ever. Many of these dramatic turnovers took place in a blink. Today, just 30 years later, there are 120 democracies, and the fraction of the world's population able to elect its own rulers has increased from one third to two thirds. There is nothing absurd about the idea that the Arab lands should be next in that line; in fact, there are many good reasons to press energetically in that direction.

The unprecedented security, freedom, wealth, and opportunity that Americans now enjoy didn't just burst forth out of a cabbage patch. These achievements were created, and then defended many times, by bloody force of arms. If contemporary Americans aren't sturdy enough to bear the sacrifices and sadness occasionally required in defense of our rare way of life, then we don't deserve our inheritance. That is the cold, undodgeable reality we face today in the Middle East.

The military men and women with whom I shared my late-January flight back to the U.S. from Iraq were mostly headed home on emergency leave. A major lost a grandfather. A sergeant based in Germany was going to collect his family, then fly to Arizona for a relative's funeral. A private quietly explained that his wife, six months pregnant, hadn't felt their baby move for some time, went to a doctor, and learned they had lost their first child. "I'm still in shock. We struggled so hard to conceive."

Not only in war, but also in the safety of our homes, life can often be hard. It is always fleeting. Its meaning comes, ultimately, from the ends toward which the life is dedicated.

There are times when the best response, perhaps the only response, to the hard blows of existence is to embrace each lump as a badge honoring the determined striving that produced it. In 1918, Teddy Roosevelt's son Quentin (who had left Harvard during his sophomore year to serve in World War I) was shot out of the sky in one of aerial warfare's early dogfights. German propagandists took

photos of his maimed body amidst the plane wreckage and, hoping to dampen American morale, sent one to Mrs. Roosevelt. Rather than letting herself be cowed, however, she insisted that the picture be displayed over a mantel, as an emblem of her family's sturdiness and their pride in sacrifice for a high cause.

What Edith Roosevelt did was both a very hard and a very soft thing. She pushed aside her own grief and expressed admiration and undying love for her son by celebrating his bravery, and refusing to abandon his fight.

As they aggressively attack ancient evil and gently nurture frail shoots of a new good, our military bear many risks in Iraq. They face enemies who aim to kill them, and to panic the American public standing behind them. Our battle against Middle Eastern extremism can thus be thought of as a struggle of wills.

But demoralization can work both ways, and today it is Iraq's insurgents who are facing physical and psychological defeat. In January, U.S. forces seized a letter written by al-Qaeda's mastermind in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, as it was being carried to top al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan. The 17-page document despairs that despite their deadly car bombs and the sporadic killing of U.S. troops, the fighters have been unable to push the Americans from Iraq, or to spark mass discord among Iraqis. The letter reports that the insurgents are having trouble convincing Iraqis to join their resistance, and mourns that American forces are "growing stronger day after day."

Al-Qaeda itself is now in shambles. Two thirds of its leaders have been killed or captured, finances have collapsed, communication has been strangled, recruiting is difficult. Iraq's Baath Party has likewise been eviscerated. And other bullies in the region have turned skittish and newly cooperative. While the U.S. will need to grapple against terror for years to come, it is finally on offense, not defense. Having brought the battle to the plotters in their own strongholds, things have turned thankfully quiet at home. And across the Middle East, the most desperate effort of a range of terrorists is now to avoid U.S. forces.

"We are at a breaking point today," Colonel Kurt Fuller of the 82nd Airborne told me in Baghdad, leaning forward for emphasis. "This insurgency is running out of steam. We see many signs that Iraqis want the violence to be over. They want to get on with their lives. They can see we are not quitting, and they are increasingly willing to come forward and help us stand up to the worst elements in their society."

As the reporting in the center of this issue demonstrates, this progress has been won by thousands of U.S. soldiers doing their duty in Iraq. If Americans back at home will exhibit the tough love of the steely Mrs. Roosevelt—celebrating the accomplishments of our sons and daughters by cherishing their sacrifices on our mantels, and multiplying and extending their courage by refusing to abandon the struggle they are waging—then this is a fight America will certainly win.



Sidelights

By Brandon Bosworth

Instead of using “Jr.,” **Jon Blake Cusack** of Holland, Michigan opted to give the name **Jon Blake Cusack 2.0** to his son.

☛ “I consider the act absolutely brutal, threatening human rights, violating human dignity, xenophobic, and worthy of the worst horrors committed by the Nazis.” Brazilian judge **Julier Sebastiao da Silva** describing the American plan to photograph and fingerprint various nationals, including Brazilians, who enter the U.S. ☛ Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, surveyed residents of nine European countries—Austria, Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Spain—to determine their attitudes toward Jews. 35 percent felt that Jews “should stop playing the victim because of the Holocaust and persecution of 50 years ago,” and 16 percent believed the world would be better off if Israel did not exist. ... An Israeli government study found that 47 percent of all anti-Semitic incidents in Western Europe occur in France, where they nearly doubled last year, from 77 to 141.

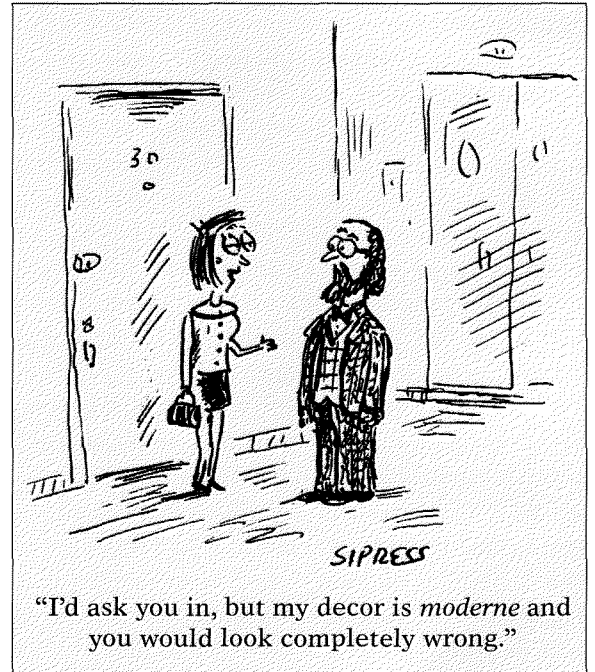
Chemical giant Degussa was contracted to apply an anti-graffiti sealant to the future Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. It was discovered that one of its former subsidiaries, Degsch, supplied some of the Zyklon-B cyanide tablets used in Nazi gas chambers during the Third Reich. A new company is being sought to apply the sealant. ☛ A European Commission report cast doubt on the E.U.’s goal of becoming “the most competitive, knowledge-based economy in the World by 2010.” According to the report, “the Union cannot catch up on the United

States as our per capita GDP is 72 percent of our American partner’s.” ☛ Saudi Arabia has banned the importation of female dolls and teddy bears.

☛ At a Spokane, Washington rally, **Howard Dean** encouraged America to switch to the metric system. “I’m a doctor. I was trained and we do our calculations in meters. We don’t use feet and inches and cubic inches and things like that.” ☛ If they were allowed to participate in American elections, only 15 percent of Canadians would vote for **George W. Bush**, reveals a *Maclean’s* poll.

☛ The Bill Clinton Presidential Library revealed that **Clinton** only sent two e-mails during his eight years as President. One was a test message to see if he knew how to send e-mail. ... Four out of five American teens have no desire to grow up to be President, according to an ABC *News/Weekly Reader* poll.

The Census Bureau reported that the U.S. population increases by one person every 12 seconds. ☛ Subway workers in Mexico City are giving away free books in an effort to fight crime. Says **Javier Gonzalez Garza**, the director of the subway system, “When people read, people change.” ☛ Tokyo residents turned in about \$23 million in cash found on the street, in the subway, and other public places in 2002. ☛ Ireland proposed an E.U.-wide ban on paying for sex. Currently, Sweden is the only E.U. member state where the practice is illegal. ☛ **Mick Henry**, a 59-year-old English retiree, was named a tribal chief



with rights to thousands of acres of Indian land in Manitoba. The son of a British woman and a Canadian Ojibway Indian, Henry says members of the Golden Eagle clan are trying to come up with a “proper ceremonial name” for him. “At the moment, they just call me the Blue-Eyed Red Indian.” ☛ **Steven Gough** successfully hiked the length of Great Britain in the nude. The 847-mile journey lasted seven months. He undertook the trek in an effort to change attitudes regarding public nudity.

Inmates at an Oklahoma jail went on a hunger strike to protest a new, healthier prison menu. The revamped menu substitutes turkey for beef in many dishes, and prisoners said they would rather starve than eat turkey loaf. ... Westchester, New York retirement-home resident Esther Danes had her first-ever meal at McDonald’s at the age of 99.