

What War Looks Like

By HOWARD ZINN

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IN ALL THE SOLEMN STATEMENTS by self-important politicians and newspaper columnists about a coming war against Iraq, and even in the troubled comments by some who are opposed to the war, there is something missing. The talk is about strategy and tactics, geopolitics and personalities. It is about air war and ground war, weapons of mass destruction, arms inspections, alliances, oil, and “regime change.”

What is missing is what an American war on Iraq will do to tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of ordinary human beings who are not concerned with geopolitics and military strategy, and who just want their children to live, to grow up. They are not concerned with “national security” but with personal security, with food and shelter and medical care and peace.

I am speaking of those Iraqis and those Americans who will, with absolute certainty, die in such a war, or lose arms or legs, or be blinded. Or they will be stricken with some strange and agonizing sickness that could lead to their bringing deformed children into the world (as



Ali Haider/Associated Press

Iraqi children watch a U.S. soldier on foot patrol in Ramadi, Iraq, in 2003.

happened to families in Vietnam, Iraq, and also the United States).

True, there has been some discussion of American casualties resulting from a land invasion of Iraq. But, as always when the strategists discuss this, the question is not about the wounded and dead as human beings, but about what number of American casualties would result in public withdrawal of support for the war, and what effect this would have on the upcoming elections for Congress and the presidency.

That was uppermost in the mind of Lyndon Johnson, as we have learned from the tapes of his White House conversations. He worried about Americans dying if he escalated the war in Vietnam, but what most concerned him was his political future. If we pull out of Vietnam, he told his friend Senator Richard Russell, “they’ll impeach me, won’t they?”

In any case, American soldiers killed in war are always a matter of statistics. Individual human beings are missing in the numbers. It is left to the poets and novelists to take us by the shoulders and shake us and ask us to look and listen. In World War I, 10 million men died on the battlefield, but we needed John Dos Passos to confront us with what that meant: In his novel *1919*, he writes of the death of John Doe: “In the tarpaper morgue at Châlons-sur-Marne in the reek of chloride of lime and the dead, they picked out the pine box that held all that was left of him.” A few pages later, Dos Passos describes him: “The blood ran into the ground, the brains oozed out of the cracked skull and were licked up by the trenchrats, the belly swelled and raised a generation of bluebottle flies, and the incorruptible skeleton, and the scraps of dried viscera and skin bundled in khaki.”

Vietnam was a war that filled our heads with statistics, of which one stood out, embedded in the stark monument in Washington: 58,000 dead. But one would have to read the letters

from soldiers just before they died to turn those statistics into human beings. And for all those not dead but mutilated in some way, the amputees and paraplegics, one would have to read Ron Kovic’s account, in his memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July*, of how his spine was shattered and his life transformed.

As for the dead among “the enemy”—that is, those young men, conscripted or cajoled or persuaded to pit their bodies against those of our young men—that has not been a concern of our political leaders, our generals, our newspapers and magazines, our television networks. To this day, most Americans have no idea, or only the vaguest, of how many Vietnamese—soldiers and civilians (actually, a million of each)—died under American bombs and shells.

And for those who know the figures, the men, women, and children behind the statistics remained unknown until a picture appeared of a Vietnamese girl running down a road, her skin shredding from napalm, or until Americans saw photos of women and children huddled in a trench as GIs poured automatic rifle fire into their bodies.

Ten years ago, in that first war against Iraq, our leaders were proud of the fact that there were only a few hundred American casualties (one wonders if the families of those soldiers would endorse the word “only”). When a reporter asked General Colin Powell if he knew how many Iraqis died in that war, he replied: “That is really not a matter I am terribly interested in.” A high Pentagon official told the *Boston Globe*, “To tell you the truth, we’re not really focusing on this question.”

Americans knew that this nation’s casualties were few in the Gulf War, and a combination of government control of the press and the media’s meek acceptance of that control ensured that the American people would not be confronted, as they had been in Vietnam, with Iraqis dead and dying.

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There were occasional glimpses of the horrors inflicted on the people of Iraq, flashes of truth in the newspapers that quickly disappeared. In mid-February 1991, U.S. planes dropped bombs on an air raid shelter in Baghdad at four in the morning, killing 400 to 500 people—mostly women and children—who were huddled there to escape the incessant bombing. An Associated Press reporter, one of the few allowed to go to the site, said: “Most of the recovered bodies were charred and mutilated beyond recognition.”

In the final stage of the Gulf War, American troops engaged in a ground assault on Iraqi positions in Kuwait. As in the air war, they encountered virtually no resistance. With victory certain and the Iraqi army in full flight, U.S. planes kept bombing the retreating soldiers who clogged the highway out of Kuwait City. A reporter called the scene “a blazing hell, a gruesome testament. To the east and west across the sand lay the bodies of those fleeing.”

That grisly scene appeared for a moment in the press and then vanished in the exultation of a victorious war, in which politicians of both parties and the press joined. President Bush crowed: “The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian peninsula.” The two major news magazines, *Time* and *Newsweek*, printed special editions hailing the victory. Each devoted about a hundred pages to the celebration, mentioning proudly the small number of American casualties. They said not a word about the tens of thousands of Iraqis—soldiers and civilians—themselves victims first of Saddam Hussein’s tyranny and then of George Bush’s war.

There was scarcely a photograph of a single dead Iraqi child, or a name of a particular Iraqi,

or an image of suffering and grief to convey to the American people what our overwhelming military machine was doing to other human beings.

The bombing of Afghanistan has been treated as if human beings are of little consequence. It has been portrayed as a “war on terrorism,” not a war on men, women, children. The few press reports of “accidents” were quickly followed with denials, justifications. There has been some bandying about of numbers of Afghan civilian deaths—but always numbers.

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and images, come through as more than a flash of truth, as one day when I read of a 10-year-old boy, named Noor Mohammed, lying on a hospital bed on the Pakistani border, his eyes gone, his hand blown off, a victim of American bombs.

Surely, we must discuss the political issues. We note that an attack on Iraq would be a flagrant violation of international law. We note that the mere possession of dangerous weapons is not grounds for war—else we would have to make war on dozens of countries. We point out that the country that possesses

by far the most “weapons of mass destruction” is our country, which has used them more often and with more deadly results than any nation on Earth. We can point to our national history of expansion and aggression. We have powerful evidence of deception and hypocrisy at the highest levels of our government.

But, as we contemplate an American attack on Iraq, should we not go beyond the agendas of the politicians and the experts? (John le Carré has one of his characters say, “I despise experts more than anyone on Earth.”)



Ali Haider/Associated Press

An injured schoolgirl arrives at Baghdad’s Al Kindi Hospital after surviving a car bomb attack.

Should we not ask everyone to stop the high-blown talk for a moment and imagine what war will do to human beings whose faces will not be known to us, whose names will not appear except on some future war memorial?

For this we will need the help of people in the arts, those who through time—from Euripides to Bob Dylan—have written and sung about specific, recognizable victims of war. In 1935, Jean Giraudoux, the French playwright, with the memory of the First World War still in his head, wrote *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*. Demokos, a Trojan soldier, asks the aged Hecuba to tell him “what war looks like.” She responds: “Like the backside of a baboon. When the baboon is up in a tree, with its hind end facing us, there is the face of war exactly: scarlet, scaly, glazed, framed in a clotted, filthy wig.”

If enough Americans could see that, perhaps the war on Iraq would not take place.

Howard Zinn is the author of “A People’s History of the United States.” This article was reprinted with permission from *The Progressive* magazine (Oct. 2003).

Teaching Ideas

For all of the following, it might help to also read George Capaccio’s article on the effects of the U.N. sanctions against Iraq, “How Many Must Die?” at http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/13_03/iraq.shtml.

- Have students examine other newspaper articles published in the months before the war with Iraq started in March 2003. Is Howard Zinn right? Do these articles ignore the realities of war? If so, why? Visit <http://www.iraqjournal.org/> and compare the reporting with mainstream media.
- Write a dialogue poem between a U.S. policy-maker or journalist and someone who fears being hurt in the United States’ attack on Iraq. For a model, see “Two Women” (p. 128, *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 1* at <http://rethinkingschools.org/publication/roc1/roc1.shtml>) or “Two Young Women”

(p. 152, *Rethinking Globalization* at <http://rethinkingschools.org/publication/rg/index.shtml>.)

- Write interior monologues from the stand-points of various individuals contemplating this war: Iraqi civilians, U.S. or Iraqi soldiers, mothers of U.S. or Iraqi soldiers, Iraqi schoolchildren, anti-war activists, etc.
- Go to the website, <http://www.dqc.org/~ben/index1.htm>, that includes photos of the human costs of the bombing of Afghanistan. Copy these off for students and ask them to choose one photo and to write from the point of view of the victim or a member of the victim’s family. They might complete this as a letter to a proponent of the war. Students might write other presidents from the standpoint of war’s victims. See also: “A Dossier on Civilian Victims of United States’ Aerial Bombing of Afghanistan,” by University of New Hampshire professor, Marc Herold, http://www.cursor.org/stories/civilian_deaths.htm
- See the article, “Thinking in Pictures,” http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/17_02/Rg172.shtml. Have students complete metaphorical drawings based on Howard Zinn’s article and other research.

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