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The Five Hundred

By William Rivers Pitt
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Thursday 8 January 2004

i
issues

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now.

-Wilfred Owen, "Strange Meeting"

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It will be upon us soon. Sometime, likely before January is out, the 500th American soldier to die in Iraq will fall. He will be killed by a roadside bomb, or a mortar, or a rifle shot from afar, or a pistol to the back of the head in a crowd, or a rocket-propelled grenade into his convoy, or into his helicopter which will plunge, blazing, from the sky. He will fall in Baghdad, or Tikrit, or Mosul, or some unnamed town in between.

e
editorial

The 500th soldier will come to know what Luke Frist, age 20, knows now. He will know what Justin C. Pollard, age 21, knows now. Michael Mihalakis, who was 18, Stuart Moore, who was 21, Nathan Nakis, who was 19, Kenneth Souslin, who was 21, Rian Ferguson, who was 22, Jeffrey Braun, who was 19, Joseph Blickenstaff, who was 23, Jason Wright, who was 19, Ray Hutchinson, who was 20, Arron Clark, who was 20, Ryan Young, who was 21, Aaron Sissel, who was 22, Rel Ravago, who was 21, Robert Roberts, who was 21, Joseph Lister, who was 22, Scott Tyrrell, who was 21, Sheldon Hawk Eagle, who was 21, Richard Hafer, who was 21, Paul Bueche, who was 19, Damian Heidelberg, who was 21, Eugene Uhl, who was 21, Joey Whitener, who was 19, Irving Medina, who was 22, Daniel Parker, who was 18, Robert Wise, who was 21, Robert Benson, who was 20, Frances Vega, who was 20, Benjamin Freeman, who was 19, Steven Acosta,

L
letters



who was 19, and Charles Sims, who was 18, all know what this 500th soldier will come soon to find out for himself, in blood and anguish and a gathering darkness.

It is better to be alive than dead, better to be young than gone, better at least to die for one's country in a cause that is just than to be spent, oath and uniform and all, as a chess piece in someone's cynical power play.

Must that 500th soldier be a man? Ask Rachel Bosveld, who was 19, Kimberly Hampton, who was 27, Sharon Swartworth, who was 43, Karina Lau, who was 20, Analaura Gutierrez, who was 21, Alyssa Peterson, who was 27, Melissa Valles, who was 26 or Lori Ann Piestewa, who was 23, what place gender has on the fields of the dead. They would answer, if they could, but their voices were lost in the grinding of the guns in Iraq.

The number of wounded American soldiers shipped home fails to find a consistent count. Some say 2,000, others say 9,000, and still others say 11,000 and rising. Another generation of shredded American veterans has been born, honored when the country needs heroes to inspire the next generation into enlisting, but forgotten the rest of the time, left to pinch pennies and rub the stumps where their healthy young legs used to send them running and leaping and dancing through a life they surrendered in a blinding flash of pain and light.

The number now stands at 487 Americans killed, according to figures provided by the Department of Defense. The Army Times, a reading staple for the enlisted ranks, had different numbers before the New Year. Jimmy Breslin, columnist from Newsday, wrote on December 30 that the Army Times said, "There were 506 killed by the time the newspaper closed last Friday. Since then, another seven have died. The newspaper has said this is the deadliest year for the U.S. military since 1972, when 640 were killed in Vietnam." That makes 513 Americans killed before the ball dropped in Times Square. Add the six who have died since then, and the number becomes 519. Even on this most important tabulation, the numbers are fuzzy.

There is no accurate accounting of the civilians who have died, but a cross-section of the math places their count in the tens of thousands. They died in their homes, shocked and awed before the fire took them. They died in the streets, fleeing the storm. They died in their beds from wounds, or disease, or despair.

How did it come to this?

It came to this because Dick Cheney said, "Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction," on August 26, 2002.

It came to this because Ari Fleischer said, "We know for a fact that there are weapons there," on January 9, 2003.

It came to this because Colin Powell said, "We know that Saddam Hussein is determined to keep his weapons of mass destruction, is determined to make more," on February 5, 2003.

It came to this because Donald Rumsfeld said, "We know where they are," about these weapons. "They are in the area around Tikrit and Baghdad," on March 30, 2003.

It came to this because George W. Bush said, "We have sources that tell us that Saddam Hussein recently authorized Iraqi field commanders to use chemical weapons," on February 8, 2003.

It came to this because George W. Bush said, "Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised," on March 17, 2003.

It came to this despite the fact that Colin Powell said, "Hussein has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction. He is unable to project conventional power against his neighbors," on February 24, 2001.

The Washington Post on January 7th ran a lead story titled "Iraq's Arsenal Was Only On Paper." The sub-headline reads, "Since Gulf War, Nonconventional Weapons Never Got Past the Planning Stage." This is yet another brick in the wall between what we were promised by the Bush administration, what we were told under the fearful and deliberately-cast shadow of September 11 was in Iraq and worthy of war, and what is actually there. The Post story reads, in part, as follows:

"In public statements and unauthorized interviews, investigators said they have discovered no work on former germ-warfare agents such as anthrax bacteria, and no work on a new designer pathogen -- combining pox virus and snake venom -- that led U.S. scientists on

a highly classified hunt for several months. The investigators assess that Iraq did not, as charged in London and Washington, resume production of its most lethal nerve agent, VX, or learn to make it last longer in storage. And they have found the former nuclear weapons program, described as a 'grave and gathering danger' by President Bush and a 'mortal threat' by Vice President Cheney, in much the same shattered state left by U.N. inspectors in the 1990s."

"A review of available evidence, including some not known to coalition investigators and some they have not made public, portrays a nonconventional arms establishment that was far less capable than U.S. analysts judged before the war. Leading figures in Iraqi science and industry, supported by observations on the ground, described factories and institutes that were thoroughly beaten down by 12 years of conflict, arms embargo and strangling economic sanctions. The remnants of Iraq's biological, chemical and missile infrastructures were riven by internal strife, bled by schemes for personal gain and handicapped by deceit up and down lines of command. The broad picture emerging from the investigation to date suggests that, whatever its desire, Iraq did not possess the wherewithal to build a forbidden armory on anything like the scale it had before the 1991 Persian Gulf War. David Kay, who directs the weapons hunt on behalf of the Bush administration, reported no discoveries last year of finished weapons, bulk agents or ready-to-start production lines. Members of his Iraq Survey Group, in unauthorized interviews, said the group holds out little prospect now of such a find."

George W. Bush and his administration promised us that Iraq possessed 26,000 liters of anthrax, 38,000 liters of botulinum toxin, 500 tons of sarin, mustard and VX gas, 30,000 munitions to deliver these agents, uranium from Africa for the development of a nuclear weapons program, and al Qaeda connections. This last bit was the key, for we were told that Saddam Hussein could hand these weapons to al Qaeda, and al Qaeda could bring them to the United States. "It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country," said Mr. Bush, "to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known."

None of it was there. The Washington Post story carried a

photograph of a crudely-drawn sketch of a rocket, like a child's musings of science fiction. That was the sum and substance of the weapons program.

In the aftermath, the rhetoric for why all of this death has been visited upon us has changed. We went to free the Iraqi people, and to bring democracy to the Middle East. When Saddam Hussein was hauled out of his hiding place several weeks ago, it was heralded as a great victory. Yet the truth of the matter undermines the bloviating glee from the Bush administration and a mainstream media that caters to their story line. Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction, no conventional military capabilities, no connections to al Qaeda, and no connections to September 11. Was he worth all this?

The democracy promised by the Bush administration is equally vacuous. The majority of Iraq's population are Shia Muslims, who are seeking to establish a fundamentalist Shia government like the one currently controlling Iran. Democracy means majority rules, and if democracy is brought, that Iraqi majority will elect that fundamentalist government and throw democracy out the back door. We knew this going in, and knew as well that a Shia-controlled Iraq would align itself with the Shia-controlled Iran on top of all that oil. So democracy, in truth, was never on the table.

American forces will never leave Iraq. It was never about freedom, or democracy. It was about the occupation of an oil-rich nation in a world where petroleum stores are dwindling. Perhaps it was about revenge for September 11, but if so, it was revenge taken on a virtually defenseless civilian population that had no hand in these attacks. It was also about profit. Nearly \$200 billion has been spent to date on this invasion and occupation. Most of that money has gone to massive corporations like Dick Cheney's Halliburton, to George Herbert Walker Bush's Carlyle Group, to weapons manufacturers, to other petroleum companies. Once upon a time, that money belonged to you. Now, it belongs to them.

So it goes for that 500th soldier, who may be the 550th soldier for all we know. Not so long ago he, or she, raised a hand and swore an oath to defend the United States of America, and pledged his, or her, life to that cause. Implicit in that oath was a promise from the country honored to receive that oath. That promise? Your life will not be spent to no good end, soldier. Your life will not be wasted. The promise was broken.

Lt. General Harold G. Moore, in his shattering memoir of the battle of Ia Drang, Vietnam, in 1965, said this: "It was no movie. When it was

over the dead did not get up and dust themselves off and walk away. The wounded did not wash away the red and go on with life, unhurt. Those who were, miraculously, unscratched were by no means untouched. This is also the story of the suffering of families whose lives were forever shattered by the death of a father, a son, a husband, a brother in that Valley. This is our story and theirs. For we were soldiers once, and young."

Wilfred Owen, the poet who wrote "Strange Meeting," knows what that 500th soldier will come to know all too soon. Owen was a soldier in World War I, and was cut down by a machine gun on November 4, 1918, just seven days before the Armistice that ended the butchery. The church bells were ringing to celebrate the war's end in his home town when his parents answered the door to find the telegram which told them of their loss. Owen was 25 years old.

Before he died, he wrote a truth.

"If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori."

William Rivers Pitt is the Managing Editor of truthout.org. He is a New York Times and international best-selling author of three books - "War On Iraq," available from Context Books, "The Greatest Sedition is Silence," available from Pluto Press, and "Our Flag, Too: The Paradox of Patriotism," available in August from Context Books.

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