



## Accustomed to Their Own Atrocities in Iraq, U.S. Soldiers Have Become Murderers

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All troops, when they occupy and battle insurgent forces, as in Iraq, or Gaza or Vietnam, are placed in "atrocities producing situations."

In this environment, surrounded by a hostile population, simple acts such as going to a store to buy a can of Coke means you can be killed. This constant fear and stress pushes troops to view everyone around them as the enemy. This hostility is compounded when the enemy, as in Iraq, is elusive, shadowy and hard to find.

The rage soldiers feel after a roadside bomb explodes, killing or maiming their comrades, is one that is easily directed over time to innocent civilians who are seen to support the insurgents. It is a short psychological leap, but a massive moral leap. It is a leap from killing -- the shooting of someone who has the capacity to do you harm -- to murder -- the deadly assault against someone who cannot harm you. The war in Iraq is now primarily about murder. There is very little killing.

After four years of war, American Marines and soldiers have become socialized to atrocity. The American killing project is not described in these terms to a distant public. The politicians still speak in the abstract terms of glory, honor, and heroism, in the necessity of improving the world, in lofty phrases of political and spiritual renewal. Those who kill large numbers of people always claim it as a virtue. The campaign to rid the world of terror is expressed with this rhetoric, as if once all terrorists are destroyed evil itself will vanish.

The reality behind the myth, however, is very different. The reality and the ideal clash when soldiers and Marines return home, alienating these combat veterans from the world around them, a world that still dines out on the myth of war and the virtues of the nation. But slowly returning veterans are giving us a new narrative of the war -- one that exposes the vast enterprise of industrial slaughter unleashed in Iraq for a lie and sustained because of wounded national pride and willful ignorance. "This unit sets up this traffic control point and this 18 year old kid is on top of an armored Humvee with a .50 caliber machine gun," remembered Geoffrey Millard who served in Tikrit with the 42nd Infantry Division. "And this car speeds at him pretty quick and he makes a split second decision that that's a suicide bomber, and he presses the butterfly trigger and puts 200 rounds in less than a minute into this vehicle. It killed the mother, a father and two kids. The boy was aged four and the daughter was aged three."

"And they briefed this to the general," Millard said, "and they briefed it gruesome. I mean, they had pictures. They briefed it to him. And this colonel turns around to this full division staff and says, 'if these fucking Hadjis learned to drive, this shit wouldn't happen.'"

Those who come back from war, like Millard and tens of thousands of other veterans, suffer not only delayed reactions to stress, but a crisis of faith. The God they knew, or thought they knew, failed them. The church or the synagogue or the mosque, which promised redemption by serving God and country, did not prepare them for the betrayal of this civic religion, for the capacity we all have for human atrocity, for the lies and myths used to mask the reality of war. War is always about betrayal, betrayal of the young by the old, of idealists by cynics and of troops by politicians. This bitter knowledge of betrayal has seeped into the ranks of American troops.

It has unleashed a new wave of embittered veterans not seen since the Vietnam War. It has made it possible for us to begin, again, to see war's death mask.

"And then, you know, my sort of sentiment of what the fuck are we doing, that I felt that way in Iraq," said Sergeant Ben Flanders, who estimated that he ran hundreds of convoys in Iraq. "It's the sort of insanity of it and the fact that it reduces it. Well, I think war does anyway, but I felt like there was this enormous reduction in my

compassion for people, the only thing that wound up mattering is myself and the guys that I was with. And everybody else be damned, whether you are an Iraqi, I'm sorry, I'm sorry you live here, I'm sorry this is a terrible situation, and I'm sorry that you have to deal with all of, you know, army vehicles running around and shooting, and these insurgents and all this stuff.

"The first briefing you get when you get off the plane in Kuwait, and you get off the plane and you're holding a duffle bag in each hand," Millard remembered. "You've got your weapon slung. You've got a web sack on your back. You're dying of heat. You're tired. You're jet-lagged. Your mind is just full of goop. And then, you're scared on top of that, because, you know, you're in Kuwait, you're not in the States anymore ... so fear sets in, too. And they sit you into this little briefing room and you get this briefing about how, you know, you can't trust any of these fucking Hadjis, because all these fucking Hadjis are going to kill you. And Hadji is always used as a term of disrespect and usually, with the 'f' word in front of it."

War is also the pornography of violence. It has a dark beauty, filled with the monstrous and the grotesque. The Bible calls it "the lust of the eye" and warns believers against it. War allows us to engage in lusts and passions we keep hidden in the deepest, most private interiors of our fantasy life. It allows us to destroy not only things but human beings. In that moment of wholesale destruction, we wield the power to the divine, the power to revoke another person's charter to live on this earth. The frenzy of this destruction -- and when unit discipline breaks down, or there was no unit discipline to begin with, frenzy is the right word -- sees armed bands crazed by the poisonous elixir our power to bring about the obliteration of others delivers. All things, including human beings, become objects -- objects to either gratify or destroy or both. Almost no one is immune. The contagion of the crowd sees to that.

Human beings are machine gunned and bombed from the air, automatic grenade launchers pepper hovels and neighbors with high-powered explosive devices and convoys race through Iraq like freight trains of death. These soldiers and Marines have at their fingertips the heady ability to call in air strikes and firepower that obliterate landscapes and villages in fiery infernos. They can instantly give or deprive human life, and with this power they became sick and demented. The moral universe is turned upside down. All human beings are used as objects. And no one walks away uninfected. War thrusts us into a vortex of pain and fleeting ecstasy. It thrusts us into a world where law is of little consequence, human life is cheap and the gratification of the moment becomes the overriding desire that must be satiated, even at the cost of another's dignity or life.

"A lot of guys really supported that whole concept that, you know, if they don't speak English and they have darker skin, they're not as human as us, so we can do what we want," said Josh Middleton, who served in the 82nd Airborne in Iraq. "And you know, when 20 year old kids are yelled at back and forth at Bragg and we're picking up cigarette butts and getting yelled at every day to find a dirty weapon. But over here, it's like life and death. And 40-year-old Iraqi men look at us with fear and we can -- do you know what I mean? -- we have this power that you can't have. That's really liberating. Life is just knocked down to this primal level of, you know, you worry about where the next food's going to come from, the next sleep or the next patrol and to stay alive."

"It's like you feel like, I don't know, if you're a caveman," he added. "Do you know what I mean? Just, you know, I mean, this is how life is supposed to be. Life and death, essentially. No TV. None of that bullshit."

It takes little in wartime to turn ordinary men into killers. Most give themselves willingly to the seduction of unlimited power to destroy, and all feel the peer pressure to conform. Few, once in battle, find the strength to resist. Physical courage is common on a battlefield. Moral courage is not.

Military machines and state bureaucracies, who seek to make us obey, seek also to silence those who return from war to speak the truth, to hide from a public eager for stories of war that fit the mythic narrative the essence of war which is death.

Camilo Mejia, who eventually applied while still on active duty to become a conscientious objector, said the ugly side of American racism and chauvinism appeared the moment his unit arrived in the Middle East. Fellow soldiers instantly ridiculed Arab-style toilets because they would be "shitting like dogs." The troops around him treated Iraqis, whose language they did not speak and whose culture was

alien, little better than animals. The word "Hadji" swiftly became a slur to refer to Iraqis, in much the same way "gook" was used to debase the Vietnamese or "rag head" is used to belittle those in Afghanistan.

Soon those around him ridiculed "Hadji food," "Hadji homes," and "Hadji music." Bewildered prisoners, who were rounded up in useless and indiscriminate raids, were stripped naked, and left to stand terrified and bewildered for hours in the baking sun. They were subjected to a steady torrent of verbal and physical abuse. "I experienced horrible confusion," Mejia remembers, "not knowing whether I was more afraid for the detainees or for what would happen to me if I did anything to help them."

These scenes of abuse, which began immediately after the American invasion, were little more than collective acts of sadism. Mejia watched, not daring to intervene, yet increasingly disgusted at the treatment of Iraqi civilians. He saw how the callous and unchecked abuse of power first led to alienation among Iraqis and spawned a raw hatred of the occupation forces. When army units raided homes, the soldiers burst in on frightened families, forced them to huddle in the corners at gun point, and helped themselves to food and items in the house.

"After we arrested drivers," he recalled, "we would choose whichever vehicles we liked, fuel them from confiscated jerry cans, and conduct undercover presence patrols in the impounded cars.

"But to this day I cannot find a single good answer as to why I stood by idly during the abuse of those prisoners except, of course, my own cowardice," he also notes.

Iraqi families were routinely fired upon for getting too close to check points, including an incident where an unarmed father driving a car was decapitated by a 50-caliber machine gun in front of his small son, although by then, Mejia notes, "this sort of killing of civilians had long ceased to arouse much interest or even comment." Soldiers shot holes into cans of gasoline being sold alongside the road and then tossed incendiary grenades into the pools to set them ablaze. "It's fun to shoot shit up," a soldier said. Some open fire on small children throwing rocks. And when improvised explosive devices go off the troops fire wildly into densely populated neighborhoods, leaving behind innocent victims who become, in the callous language of war, "collateral damage."

"We would drive on the wrong side of the highway to reduce the risk of being hit by an IED," Mejia said of the deadly roadside bombs. "This forced oncoming vehicles to move to one side of the road, and considerably slowed down the flow of traffic. In order to avoid being held up in traffic jams, where someone could roll a grenade under our trucks, we would simply drive up on sidewalks, running over garbage cans and even hitting civilian vehicles to push them out of the way. Many of the soldiers would laugh and shriek at these tactics."

At one point the unit was surrounded by an angry crowd protesting the occupation. Mejia and his squad opened fire on an Iraqi holding a grenade, riddling the man's body with bullets. Mejia checked his clip afterwards and determined that he fired 11 rounds into the young man. Units, he said, nonchalantly opened fire in crowded neighborhoods with heavy M-240 Bravo machine guns, AT-4 launchers and Mark 19s, a machine gun that spits out grenades.

"The frustration that resulted from our inability to get back at those who were attacking us," Mejia writes, "led to tactics that seemed designed simply to punish the local population that was supporting them."

He watched soldiers from his unit abuse the corpses of Iraqi dead. Mejia related how, in one incident, soldiers laughed as an Iraqi corpse fell from the back of a truck.

"Take a picture of me and this motherfucker," one of the soldiers who had been in Mejia's squad in third platoon said, putting his arm around the corpse.

The shroud fell away from the body revealing a young man wearing only his pants. There was a bullet hole in his chest.

"Damn, they really fucked you up, didn't they!?" the soldier laughed.

The scene, Mejia noted, was witnessed by the dead man's brothers and cousins. Senior officers, protected in heavily fortified compounds, rarely saw combat. They

sent their troops on futile missions in the quest to be awarded Combat Infantry Badges. This recognition, Mejia notes, "was essential to their further progress up the officer ranks." This pattern meant that "very few high-ranking officers actually got out into the action, and lower-ranking officers were afraid to contradict them when they were wrong." When the badges, bearing an emblem of a musket with the hammer dropped, resting on top of an oak wreath, were finally awarded, the commanders immediately brought in Iraqi tailors to sew the badges on the left breast pockets of their desert combat uniforms.

"This was one occasion when our leaders led from the front," Mejia noted bitterly. "They were among the first to visit the tailors to get their little patches of glory sewn next to their hearts."

The war breeds gratuitous and constant acts of violence.

"I mean, if someone has a fan, they're a white collar family," said Phillip Chrystal, who carried out raids on Iraqi homes in Kirkuk. "So we get started on this day, this one, in particular. And it starts with the psy ops [psychological operations] vehicles out there, you know, with the big speakers playing a message in Arabic or Farsi or Kurdish or whatever they happen to be saying, basically, saying put your weapons, if you have them, next to the front door in your house. Please come outside, blah, blah, blah, blah. And we had Apaches flying over for security, if they're needed, and it's also a good show of force. And we were running around, and we'd done a few houses by this point, and I was with my platoon leader, my squad leader and maybe a couple other people, but I don't really remember.

"And we were approaching this one house, and this farming area, they're, like, built up into little courtyards," he said. "So they have like the main house, common area. They have like a kitchen and then, they have like a storage shed-type deal. And we were approaching, and they had a family dog. And it was barking ferociously, because it was doing its job. And my squad leader, just out of nowhere, just shoots it. And he didn't -- mother fucker -- he shot it and it went in the jaw and exited out. So I see this dog -- and I'm a huge animal lover. I love animals -- and this dog has like these eyes on it and he's running around spraying blood all over the place. And like, you know, the family is sitting right there with three little children and a mom and a dad horrified. And I'm at a loss for words. And so, I yell at him. I'm like what the fuck are you doing.

"And so, the dog's yelping. It's crying out without a jaw. And I'm looking at the family, and they're just scared. And so, I told them I was like fucking shoot it, you know. At least, kill it, because that can't be fixed. It's suffering. And I actually get tears from just saying this right now, but -- and I had tears then, too, -- and I'm looking at the kids and they are so scared. So I got the interpreter over with me and, you know, I get my wallet out and I gave them 20 bucks, because that's what I had. And, you know, I had him give it to them and told them that I'm so sorry that asshole did that. Which was very common. I don't know if it's rednecks or what, but they feel that shooting dogs is something that adds to one's manliness traits. I don't know. I had a big problem with that.

"Was a report ever filed about it?" he asked. "Was anything ever done? Any punishment ever dished out? No, absolutely not. He was a sycophant down to the T."

We make our heroes out of clay. We laud their gallant deeds and give them uniforms with colored ribbons on their chest for the acts of violence they committed or endured. They are our false repositories of glory and honor, of power, of self-righteousness, of patriotism and self-worship, all that we want to believe about ourselves. They are our plaster saints of war, the icons we cheer to defend us and make us and our nation great. They are the props of our civic religion, our love of power and force, our belief in our right as a chosen nation to wield this force against the weak and rule. This is our nation's idolatry of itself. And this idolatry has corrupted religious institutions, not only here but in most nations, making it impossible for us to separate the will of God from the will of the state.

Prophets are not those who speak of piety and duty from pulpits -- few people in pulpits have much worth listening to -- but it is the battered wrecks of men and women who return from Iraq and speak the halting words we do not want to hear, words that we must listen to and heed to know ourselves. They tell us war is a soulless void. They have seen and tasted how war plunges us to barbarity, perversion, pain and an unchecked orgy of death. And it is their testimonies alone

that have the redemptive power to save us from ourselves.

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