

Albany Times Union

Over there

Our soldiers are doing their duty; are we doing ours?

By THOMAS J. RALEIGH

First published: Sunday, November 14, 2004

We'll meet in Mesopotamia ...

I am no student of ancient culture

Before I talk, I should read a book

But there is one thing that I do know

There are a lot of ruins in Mesopotamia.

-- "Mesopotamia," The B-52s

As you put down your coffee, reach for a bagel and read this, more than 10,000 U.S. Marines and Army soldiers are engaging in battle. They are in a close quarter fight, and in some cases, hand-to-hand combat, in the streets and alleys of Fallujah, a city roughly the size of Buffalo.

Try to imagine the sounds and smells of urban fighting, where our troops do not have the advantage of standoff and precision weapons; where every room, of every floor, of every booby-trapped building, of every city block -- from sewer to rooftop -- has to be cleared by 19-year-old privates from the Bronx and Wichita, who are led by 20-something sergeants from Boston and Waco.

Be certain of this. None of these guys cares if the soldier or Marine next to him is a liberal from Massachusetts, or a card-carrying NRA conservative from Wyoming. They have only three things on their minds: accomplishing the mission, staying alive and watching out for their buddy. Our troops are well-trained, well-equipped and well-led on the battlefield. And with a little bit of luck, despite the dangers, the chances are good that the great majority of them will see the sun come up again tomorrow. We all pray for their safety as they go into battle, a battle that -- just as it did in April -- will likely go on for days, perhaps weeks.

Given what we are asking our troops to do in Iraq, we ought to reflect on the task, on what is at stake and the goals we have set for ourselves in Iraq and in the region. To date, sadly, incredibly, the great majority of Americans have other things on their minds.

In April, while fighting was raging during an earlier battle for Fallujah, I asked some colleagues who work in the Pentagon if they thought ours is a nation at war. No, my comrades bitterly replied, "Ours is a nation with an Army at war."

At that time, when Marines were suffering significant casualties in the midst of heavy fighting, a poll indicated that less than 50 percent of Americans considered foreign policy and national security the most pressing issues before us. Not much has changed since then.

On Election Day, when voters were asked what issue was paramount in selecting their next president, many replied "values." According to the exit polls, 22 percent said moral values were the most important issue -- more than the economy (20 percent), terrorism (19 percent) or the war in Iraq (15 percent) which was fourth -- fourth -- on the list.

(By the time you have read this much, a U.S. soldier or Marine or innocent Iraqi may have been killed or injured. Have another sip of coffee.)

It is time for us to start giving this fight the serious attention it deserves. Ask yourself, your friends, your neighbors and your bowling partners some specific and important questions.

Why are we in Iraq? When your bowling partner says, "To get rid of Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction," remind your bowling partner that we have not found any WMD in Iraq -- none. (Your bowling partner is not alone. As columnist Bob Herbert pointed out in *The New York Times* on Nov. 8, a recent University of Maryland study found a third of the people who support President Bush believe weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq.)

Your bowling partner will defensively counter with, "Hey, before the war our allies and our own intelligence community said Iraq had WMD. Colin Powell laid it all out at the U.N.!" Remind your bowling buddy/car pool crony/poker pal of two things. First, Powell has stated that he is "distressed" some of the information he presented to the United Nations turned out to be "inaccurate." Second, congressional investigations into this strategic intelligence failure have found that before the war, there was considerable lack of consensus among various U.S. intelligence agencies regarding the threat that Iraq posed to us. The investigations suggest the decision ultimately to go to war was based on the selective use of information, dubious sources and other significant problems within our intelligence community related to policy, collection and analysis that we are still trying to sort out and fix.

When your bowling partner goes to the fallback argument that, "We had to take the fight to the terrorists," remind him that no one has uncovered any evidence of a connection that links Iraq to 9/11, or that links Iraq to al-Qaida.

When your bowling partner then goes to fallback argument No. 2, that "We are liberating the Iraqi people, we are bringing democracy to the Middle East," you might suggest to him that we can't even spell "Mesopotamia," we know nothing about this region, its culture, its people. How are we going to bring democracy to these peoples (he will be puzzled by your use of the plural). Then tell him you have an acquaintance who works as an editor for the *Oxford English Dictionary* and was looking for another example to illustrate the meaning of hubris -- and that his rationale for the war would fit nicely as an example of "American hubris."

Finally, your bowling partner will likely then tell you what the President and the vice president are telling you -- that "Democracy is on the march in Iraq." Your reply might be something along the lines of "Excuse me, are we on the same planet? Can you read? Do you have TV?"

(By the time you have read to here, another U.S. soldier or Marine or innocent Iraqi has been killed or injured. Take another bite of that bagel.)

And speaking of U.S. killed and wounded ...

"In the Persian Gulf War, about three troops were wounded in action for every fatality. In Iraq, about seven are being wounded for every one killed," Alan Bavley of Knight Ridder wrote in a December 2003 article. Among those Bavley cited in his piece was Col. Jonathan H. Jaffin of Walter Reed Medical Center, who said, "Soldiers that might have died in a previous war have survived and come back as amputees."

When I wrote this, 1,133 U.S. military personnel had been killed in Iraq and 8,120 had been wounded. It is not a stretch to say that were it not for the thankful advances in both ballistic protection and trauma medicine since the first Gulf War, the number of Americans killed in action in Iraq by this point could well have exceeded 3,000. How many casualties is this fight worth -- 3,000? 5,000?

Do most Iraqis support us -- or with each passing day, and with each additional civilian casualty, are we seen as more occupier than liberator? Will our efforts, and blood, and treasure, in the end bring long-term peace to Iraq and its neighbors? Or does our continued presence only serve to destabilize the region and radicalize those who heretofore considered themselves "moderate" Muslims?

What are the reactions and perceptions among other governments and peoples in the region to coalition efforts in Iraq? What do people in Iran, in (nuclear capable) Pakistan, in Saudi Arabia and in Egypt think about coalition aims and methods? What does a teenager in Islamabad, in Cairo, in Baghdad think when he sees a U.S. Apache helicopter firing upon, or in the vicinity of, a mosque?

Can we and the Brits win this thing essentially on our own? What is the toll to our Army and Marine Corps, whose fighting men and women are serving extended and repetitive tours in combat? Is it best to fight terrorism with infantry brigades, or with robust paramilitary cells and covert action -- in the shadows so to speak?

If we are indeed a nation at war, we should not be timid in asking ourselves, and those we live and work with, whether our political leaders and military strategists are being decisive and resolute or compulsive and stubborn. People ought not confuse skepticism with defeatism, nor should they confuse prudent stock-taking and reflection with wavering and second-guessing. As long as there is some doubt with regards to the wisdom of our policies, the effectiveness of our operations and the prospects that our efforts will contribute to peace and stability in the region, the subject of Iraq in particular, and the struggle against terrorism in general, ought to be the topic of an informed and intelligent debate. This debate ought not have ended with the most recent elections; it can only end when there is relative peace in the region.

As you go through a normal day, think about the infantryman -- the "grunt" -- for whom on a normal day, a shower, a bed, a warm meal and a cold beer are luxuries. On days like today in places like Fallujah, the private, the sergeant and the lieutenant would be just as appreciative for a brief pause in the fighting and the chance to evacuate a wounded buddy, have a cigarette and maybe get 15 minutes of sleep.

Thomas J. Raleigh is a Niskayuna resident who retired in August as an Army lieutenant colonel after 22 years of service as an infantry officer and military attache. His e-mail address is tomraleigh@nycap.rr.com