

Captain May – July 8, 2003 – published essay:

“Worried about quicksand of war in Iraq”

Houston Chronicle Outlook, by Captain Eric May

When we were about to begin our war against Iraq, we expected to soon capture, control and convert it – then make a lot of money in its Reconstruction. Erstwhile allies complained that we were playing with matches in the world’s most flammable region, but we told them that they could go to Helsinki.

When our bombs started falling March 20, the United Nations made a silent protest by putting a shroud over Pablo Picasso’s famous painting *Guernica*, which encanvassed the horror of modern war. That story didn’t get around much, though. After all, we had already dismissed the UN as even less relevant than NATO.

On May 1 President George W. Bush stood on the deck of USS Abraham Lincoln and proudly declared an end to major combat operations, but just this week Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stood before reporters and testily told them that while major combat operations are indeed at an end, the United States is still at war. The president’s words were naïveté; the secretary’s were nonsense.

Since we began the war in Iraq, the Bush administration has threatened (in order) Turkey to the north, Syria to the west, Saudi Arabia to the south and Iran to the east. Many Americans think we need to get more aggressive. This week in the Chronicle, Bush apologists loudly banged the war drums: Austin Bay opined that it was a good thing we recently attacked Syrian border guards in Syrian territory, since respect for national borders only hinders us in the war on terror. Sometimes it seems like we’re at war – or may soon be at war – with lots of folks. Columnist Thomas L Friedman stated his belief that we should double our troop commitment to Iraq. Throughout the piece, he skillfully avoided the disturbing word *escalation*.

The LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP! George Bush/Powell Doctrine has been replaced by the JUMP RIGHT IN! George W. Bush/Rumsfeld Doctrine. The results so far suggest that the father picked his strategy and his strategist better than the son. The First Gulf War required a mere 100 hours of ground operations to end, while the Second Gulf War has passed its 100th day, and is just beginning. The forces that were supposed to be home by summer are still over there, and we’re committing ourselves to a long occupation.

The Pentagon now admits that we have an Iraqi insurgency on our hands. Insurgency is what we tried to deal with in Vietnam, and what the Soviet Union tried to deal with in Afghanistan. Both attempts failed, after around ten years of war and around 50,000 deaths, showing that superpowers don't necessarily get super results.

OK, I'm worried. In fact, I was worried on April 3, when my essay "Visions of Stalingrad: Claim victory in Iraq now" appeared in the Chronicle's Outlook Section. That piece earned me the nickname of "the April Fool," because in it I wrote that Operation Iraqi Freedom was a bold leap forward – straight into quicksand.

Nowadays I take some comfort because General Wesley Clark is worried, too. In a June 25 CNN Crossfire interview, Clark launched a broad attack on the president who attacked Iraq:

- Asked about recent reports that the Bush administration had pressured intelligence officials to mangle data and justify war, Clark went even further than the question: "There was a predetermination that started back in the 1990s to go after Saddam Hussein. 9/11 provided the opportunity to mobilize public opinion to do that."
- Asked why the Bush administration had invaded Iraq in the first place, Clark cited "belief that somehow there was a window of opportunity, that the United States had a period of maybe 10 or 15 years before China would become too strong, where we could use our unchallengeable military muscle and clean up the area."
- Asked about the problems of our occupation of Iraq, Clark repeatedly stressed that we needed to make our presence "legitimate," a reminder that the reasons we gave for going there in the first place seem illegitimate today. He suggested a major role for the United Nations and other international organizations.
- Clark made another good suggestion: "I think that the American people deserve a hearing on Iraq. I think it needs to be openly, transparently presented as to what exactly the issues were."

Critics may say that Clark is merely another Democratic presidential wannabe taking pot shots at the Bush administration, but the general has acted with courageous integrity before: As NATO commander, he repeatedly pushed a vacillating President Clinton to stick it out in war torn Bosnia, and in doing so helped bring that country under control. After the job was done, Clinton canned Clark out of spite, thus earning the general

praises from Republicans for being a true patriot. It's hard to see why the man who uprightly talked sense to Democrat Clinton is crooked when he talks sense about Republican Bush.

Clark seems more like a voice of sanity to worriers like me, and as a former Army intelligence officer and Desert Storm volunteer, I worry a lot: I worry about wobbly war plans; I worry that Rumsfeld is canning generals who fail to tell him what he wants to hear; I worry that the US body count could climb from one per day to one per hour; and I worry that the president who as a young American prudently avoided the sweltering jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia will send a generation of young Americans to the sweltering deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan. In short, I worry that we are sinking deeper into the quicksand – and we're trying to thrash our way out.

I believe that the next presidential election will be about the missteps and misstatements that have misled us into this war. In that case, a victorious general might be as welcome a candidate in 2004 as General Eisenhower was in 1952, when voters liked Ike for promising to get us out of Korea.

I hope we will soon have the public hearings that General Clark has called for. In the meantime, I'll continue to worry when the Bush administration says that things are well in hand. Maybe what we have well in hand is a time bomb.

May, a Desert Storm Volunteer, served on the general staff of the Houston's 75th Division. In April he sat for two weeks in front of his alma mater, the University of Houston Honors College, to take up a collection for US war dead. After 40 hours he had received \$20. He spent the next three weeks riding a bicycle to Ft. Stewart, Georgia to deliver the money to the headquarters of the 3rd Infantry Division.