

Captain May – April 13, 2003 – unpublished essay:

3/7 Cavalry, tragedy and travesty

[Letter to Frank Michel, associate editor, Houston Chronicle]

Dear Frank,

Since I talked with you the day after the 3/7 Cavalry was attacked at the Baghdad Airport, you have been the only media person to take me seriously. Thanks for encouraging me to write. I have tried to spark other media interest in the fate of the 3/7 Cavalry, but have been ignored by television and radio. I have been dismissed as crazy more than once.

For the last week I have been taking up a collection for the unit's Army Emergency Relief fund. The donations bucket carries the sign: "Please donate to the relief fund of the 3/7 Cavalry, which took losses over the weekend." I have collected for 22 hours, and have exactly twenty dollars in donations. Although the public has no reason to doubt the unit that was the spearhead of the advance has taken casualties, it has not been told to grieve yet, so it renders no gifts to the dependents of the dead.

Nothing would make me happier than to be wrong in my inferences. I hope the facts will disprove me. Should my fears about the 3/7 Cavalry be realized, I ask that you publish this essay.

Captain May, MI, USA

I wept as I watched CNN Friday night. It was pre-dawn, April 5 in Iraq, the end of the night when Saddam Hussein had promised us an attack. With a background in military intelligence and public affairs, I could see and hear the confusion, fear and tragedy in the faces and voices, and I could read between the lines used to keep the disaster hushed. It was apparent to me that the 3/7 Cavalry, the avant grade for our assault across the desert, had been blown off the Baghdad Airport.

"There but for the grace of God go I," I kept thinking. I had been a volunteer for Operation Desert Storm, and was a former cavalryman.

The attack made military sense for the Iraqis. The airport was key terrain for the control of Baghdad, and had been fiercely contested. It would have been a surprise to me if they had not rigged it as a booby trap, targeted it for a counterattack, or both.

Saddam had banked on winning the war by repeating the debacle of Mogadishu, in which a handful of well-publicized casualties had swung American public opinion against military involvement in Somalia. At the Baghdad Airport he had executed the best ambush since the Little Big Horn, where Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull destroyed the same Seventh Cavalry Regiment. By morning writers would pen the name George "Custer" Bush and national resolve for the war would plummet.

Such dilemmas are the price we pay for the freedoms guaranteed by our Constitution, the first and foremost of which is freedom of the press. But we didn't pay the price for freedom. Plugged into the media matrix, we didn't blink and we didn't ask questions. We ceased to function as Americans.

Saturday and Sunday following the disaster were part J. Edgar Hoover and part P.T. Barnum. The tail wagged the dog. The rescued Private Jessica, a tragic battle casualty, was morphed into another "Baby Jessica" to hold national attention. The 3/7 Cavalry breakout from the attack was labeled a "foray" into Baghdad. The U.S. body count, a pesky statistic from the Vietnam era, was hidden in the fog of war. Monday morning offered a new scenario to dazzle the public: Four one-ton bombs had "probably" killed Saddam in one of his lairs. We had already been told that the first night of the war; it worked again. We focused on Saddam and we focused on victory. We stayed on message..., and we stayed in the dark. Middle Eastern media carried stories of a massacre of U.S. forces at the airport, but we knew not to trust them.

I didn't sleep at all the night the 3/7 Cavalry fell into a trap, and I haven't slept much since. If my conviction about the unit's bad luck is right, many fears, strange to me as an American who has spent a lifetime of service to his country, keep me awake at night:

- I fear we can no longer trust the president to tell the truth, since he clearly did not trust us to know the truth when the chips were down.
- I fear his military actions go against to the parting advice of two former ones, both men who had fought wars. In his valedictory George Washington admonished us to beware of foreign entanglements, and the Middle East is likely to be as entangling as quicksand. The departing Dwight Eisenhower bade us beware of the military industrial complex, and that complex seems mightier than ever, now that it has either co-opted or coerced the media.
- I fear the public will not feel outraged at being offered a desert mirage instead of the gritty reality of a desert war. Will media "package" the unlucky 3/7 Cavalry as a band of martyred brothers rather than as grim casualties? Will media make our children think of what is inside each flag-draped coffin: the torn, cold body of a youth who dreamed of the future, but was buried twice, first in the news, then in the earth? Our children must be our reason for reason itself, since they are the warriors of our future wars. Will our children absorb images of fallen heroes, saluted by three farewell salvos of rifle fire? Will they want to grow up to fight wars, too? Are we training our own suicide volunteers for a Disney world war?
- I fear the media has signed a Faustian pact in exchange for a close-up of the best story of the new millennium: a successful American incursion into the Middle

East. Has media/military collaboration ceased to be a public affairs operation conducted for the American people and become a psychological operation conducted *against* them?

- I fear my president ordered assassination in the “bad luck” incidents of Army tanks shelling the Baghdad hotel that housed foreign journalists. The Arab media believes it was murder, and they were telling the truth about the 3/7 Cavalry. Was the “truth” we saw, heard and read in the embedded media the only version of truth admissible to an Orwellian cover-up, and was there a death penalty for dissent?

- I fear the tentacles of the federal government have stretched too far. In suppressing the biggest negative story of the war, it has shown a mighty grasp over a professional group dedicated to the truth, but embedded with lies. Twisting the arms of the professions has always been part of the blueprint for strong-arm governments, and strong-arm governments tend to be as repressive to their citizens as they are bellicose to other countries.

These are my fears, based on my belief that since the night we lost the 3/7 Cavalry:

- our president has lied to us and our representatives in order to insure that the country did *not* function according to its Constitution;
- our Congress has passed a \$2.5 trillion national war budget in ignorance of the true conditions of the war;
- our military has coerced those who professed to be our truth tellers into become purveyors of lies of omission and commission.

I look at my oath of commission as an Army officer and see that I swore to defend the Constitution. The commander in chief took an oath in which he swore to do the same. He betrayed it.

Congress should demand explanations from President George W. Bush, and prepare articles of impeachment if he can't or won't explain himself. As for the media, perhaps it will realize that although it was willingly embedded by the government, it is not married to it. A trial of impeachment of the president would be as good a story as the war was, and might even tempt the media to rouse itself from its bed and reconsider its spring fling in Iraq. Only then can we claim to live in the land of the free and the home of the brave. Only then can we say that the fate of the 3/7 Cavalry was a tragedy, and not a travesty.

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