

*Captain May – August 20, 2003 – unpublished essay:*

***“War in Iraq: past, present and future”***

I take no pleasure in playing the role of Cassandra, the heroine whose curse it was to see the future when others would not, but I guess I’ve read too many Greek tragedies for my own good. The role is mine.

After Operation Desert Storm, I was a mere captain on a general staff, but like any competent officer, knew my ABC’s when it came to strategy and logistics, command and intelligence; so I felt comfortable arguing against the hawks who wanted the first President Bush to begin an attack of Iraq after freeing Kuwait. To me and most of my peers, it was a no-brainer:

“The enlargement of Desert Storm’s object would have taken us back to what we transcended *in* Desert Storm – the Vietnam quagmire, with its high death tolls, inconclusive results, and political divisiveness at home and abroad. I agree with the critics who once exclaimed “No more Vietnams!” Creating one more in Iraq wouldn’t have helped our country.” (Outlook, August 12, 1992, “Success of Desert Storm being judged unfairly”)

I did not change my view about Iraq after September 11, 2001. Like everyone else, I was angry, but the Army had trained me not to allow anger to cloud my reason, especially in time of crisis. So this year, as our military forces charged across the desert toward Baghdad, I admonished the hawks again:

“Our plan for a quick knockout – the classic aim of blitz warfare – is disappearing, and a protracted war means more time for international frictions to spark new conflicts with an irritable U.S. government. Britain has lined up with us, not to forget Italy, Spain and sundry others. But Germany, France, Russia and Turkey seem to have lined up against us, not to forget the public opinion of the Islamic world. NATO is split. The Arab world wants to convene a General Assembly of the United Nations to condemn us. Meanwhile, North Korea is threatening a nuclear tantrum and Japan is leaning toward rearmament. Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, has recently said that the world is at its most dangerous point since the Cold War. A question frightens me: With all this geopolitical jostling, just how many mistakes are we away from World War Three?”

I concluded the op-ed: “Military intelligence officers are accustomed to being told that their field is a contradiction in terms, and that they are the bearers of bad news and worst-case scenarios. But it seems to me that fortune is no longer smiling on our heroic liberation of Iraq, and I’m afraid we may learn too late that we have

stepped into quicksand.” (Outlook, April 3, 2003, “Visions of Stalingrad: Claim victory in Iraq now”)

With such fears for my country’s course in mind, I joined General Wesley Clark in his June 25 call (CNN Crossfire) for an investigation of the reasons President Bush led us to war. Clark said he believed that the president had inherited an itch to finish the first war with Iraq and thereby grab control of the Middle East. I agreed.

“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.” (Outlook, July 8, “Worried about quicksand of war in Iraq”)

I make no boast of being a gifted strategist, and I’ve forgotten most of what I used to know about the wizardry of logistics, but I can say what most American officers can say: I took my art seriously enough to spend years practicing it in the field. I read those officers who were the best at it, and sought out soldiers of any rank who could teach me something I didn’t know. Most of all, I asked questions of the soldiers who had seen the real thing, and they told me that we should always think hard and long before we went to war.

The kind of observations I have made on my home-town op-ed page over the years are just the kind of common-sense things that the officers I have known were saying and still say, but didn’t and don’t put into paper, particularly if they have careers riding on their words. They are the real-live men and women who serve their stints and sweat it out in the service, whether in time of peace or war. They are honorable, wise and brave. I count among them general officers like General Colin Powell and General Wesley Clark, both of whom urged a hawkish president to think twice before starting an open-ended war in the Middle East.

A French statesman once observed that war was too important to be left to the generals. Now we’re finding out in Iraq that war is too important to leave the generals out.

Iraq was, is and will remain quicksand for invaders. Senators McCain and Hutchison, returning from bombed Baghdad, say that we should escalate our troop levels. With respect, I *emphatically* disagree. I urge them – and anyone who wants to see how desert irregular forces can pin down a whole army – to rent the classic movie *Lawrence of Arabia*, based on the great military book *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by Colonel T.E. Lawrence. The Arab revolt, of which he was the military leader, pinned down the Ottoman southern front in the First World War, and eventually rolled it up.

In the arid lands of Islam, we are seen as the new Ottomans. Worse, we are seen as Christian crusaders. There will never be an end to the attacks against us, and if we can be honest, were they in our streets, there would be no end to our attacks against them. They will continue to destroy their own infrastructure because they know that deprivation will turn their countrymen against the occupation. We have become another Israel in another Palestine, and that is a drama of decades that we do not want to enact with uncounted American lives. We have sewn the dragon's teeth in Iraq, and we must prepare our exit strategy before fields of foes spring up against us. When we go, it will be as pathetic as the fall of Vietnam, but go we must, and the sooner the better. When all is said and done, it's the national good that we must consider with humility and intelligence, and so far, those two qualities have been most subdued.

You heard it from Cassandra; ignore it at our peril.

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