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September Roundtable: Introduction

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September Roundtable: Introduction

Abstract

An annotation of:

“The Other War: Iraq Vets Bear Witness” by Chris Hedges and Laila Al-Arian. The Nation, July 30, 2007.

Keywords

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[“The Other War: Iraq Vets Bear Witness” by Chris Hedges and Laila Al-Arian. *The Nation*, July 30, 2007.](#)

An Annotation:

Beyond the Congressional hearings and the Defense Department briefings, operating on another plane from debates in the American media about the state of the war in Iraq, are the daily operations of the men and women of the U.S. Military who have been dealt the responsibility of “winning” the war. For observers without first-hand exposure to the “hell” of war, the perspective of those on the ground is something foreign. Even reading their testimonials is surreal, though it cannot be dismissed as mere fiction. Rather, the harsh reality of their experience is evidence of the depth of the impact this war has had on those most directly involved. This month’s Roundtable discusses the human story that has been virtually absent from all mainstream discourse on this seemingly intractable conflict. This human story is irreducible to the traumatic effect on the soldiers, the enormous cost of Iraqi civilian lives, and the growing hatred throughout the world of all things American—these elements are the causes and results of a tragedy, the sum of which is unknowable and the end of which is unforeseeable.

“In Iraq, Specialist Middleton said, ‘a lot of guys really supported that whole concept that, you know, if they don’t speak English and have darker skin, they’re not as human as us, so we can do what we want.’”

The dehumanization of the enemy in warfare—commonly achieved through racist demonization—is not a new phenomenon, but a perpetual product of conflict. Conceiving of the opposing force as the “Other,” as so radically different from “Us” that any comparison fails from the outset, seeks to teach the type of moral flexibility necessary to affect the most harm and sidestep the kind of second guessing that disrupts *esprit de corps*. Once it has been established that “They” are not like “Us,” the Golden Rule—the virtual foundation of universal human rights—ceases to play a role in decision-making. The rules of war are effectively dismissed as irrelevant as soon as the humanity of each side is relegated.

“The second you left the gate of your base, you were always worried,’ said Sergeant Flatt. ‘You were constantly watchful for IEDs. And you could never see them. I mean, it’s just by pure luck who’s getting killed and who’s not. If you’ve been in firefights earlier that day or that week, you’re even more stressed and insecure to a point where you’re almost trigger-happy.’”

Without a clear-cut mission, and ill-equipped to deal with the threats that confront them, U.S. soldiers are placed in a compromised position from day one. Iraqis equally experience symptoms, as U.S. forces are simultaneously perceived as occupiers, as well as those responsible for protection from violent elements within. Confused, base instincts fill the space previously held by common sense and proper training; survival and self-defense take priority. Unprepared, scared and armed with lethal weaponry, lines between innocent and guilty, friend and enemy, blur completely.

“For Sergeant Westphal, that night was a turning point. ‘I just remembered thinking to myself, I just brought terror to someone else under the American flag, and that’s just not what I joined the army to do,’ he said.”

In war, the law of unintended consequences reigns supreme because the stakes are so high. However, any peripheral research into military history will illustrate that these circumstances are not new ones. It is for this expectation that it is wiser to tiptoe rather than trudge ahead on the march to war. Unfortunately, this human story does not provide the way out; it merely describes the wrong way in. Human rights advocates face the daunting task of enriching the debate about the Iraq war by injecting a greater respect for human dignity, recognizing that the situation may get worse before it gets better.

These issues and many more are addressed in this month’s installment of *Human Rights & Human Welfare’s* Roundtable.

~ *The Editors*