

Hot Type

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Another “Good War”

The *Trib* questions the war it championed—and comes out with its faith intact.

By Michael Miner

A gag Christmas gift came to my house, a “count-down clock” key chain labeled “Backwards Bush.” As I write there are 1,114 days, 8 hours, 27 minutes, and—let’s see—20.9 seconds left in his second term. That’s an eternity if you don’t like Bush.

On November 20 the *Tribune* editorial page issued a challenge to the kind of readers who take comfort in Backwards Bush key chains. It dared them to see if they could handle the truth about the number one count in their indictment. Over the next several weeks, said the *Tribune*, it intended to take a long, hard look at the origins of the war in Iraq. “Did George W. Bush intentionally mislead this nation and its allies into war?” it asked. “Or is it his critics who have misled Americans, recasting history to discredit the president and his policies?”

In 2003 the *Tribune* editorial page had championed Bush’s war; would it now find against Bush and therefore against itself? That didn’t seem likely—especially given the polarized set of alternatives it offered, which ruled out the possibility of honorable misjudgment. Surely the *Tribune* would never admit to being deceived.

The November 20 editorial

went on to say, “This re-examination of the administration’s rationale for war offers doses of discomfort for the self-assured—those who have unquestioningly supported, or opposed, the ongoing war in Iraq.” But no one could doubt who’d wind up being told to swallow the larger “doses of discomfort.”

I’m guessing most Bush bashers who read the *Tribune* editorials, which concluded on December 28, judged them a shameless apologia for the president. Given the language that launched them, I found them surprisingly balanced.

Try to remember the state of the nation three years ago. Most Americans supported the looming invasion of Iraq because Bush said it was the right thing to do; others thought the idea was reprehensible, many simply because the idea was Bush’s. But some Americans with no love for the president believed the war might accomplish something useful. The troubling questions in their minds—our minds, because I was one—were these: Could a war be justified that seemed not absolutely necessary and that Bush (less so Tony Blair) flogged by playing to our fears? Was this the right war at the wrong time—when bin

Laden should be the quarry, not Hussein? And if going to war was the thing to do, could we trust this war to Bush, who touted it as if unaware that war is chaotic and evil?

The *Tribune* signed on with its eyes wide open. “The gauzy vision that proponents of war offer for a post-Hussein Iraq is, to be frank, unconvincing,” it allowed in its March 2, 2003, editorial “The case for war.” But the United Nations and Europe had waltzed with Hussein since the 1991 gulf war, enabling his “12 years of cunning defiance,” and in the *Tribune*’s view he’d become too dangerous to put up with any longer.

The “core issue” was clear: “Saddam Hussein must disarm,” and he hadn’t. “Despite 17 UN directives, Hussein has refused to account for his stores of deadly biological and chemical weapons, or to come clean about his nuclear aspirations.” While the world chose “to kick the can down the road and hope nothing bad happens,” a “thug” remained free to butcher his own people, intimidate his neighbors, and “mock the rest of the world.”

The *Tribune*’s recent editorials did no philosophizing on just and unjust wars. They declined to wonder what else we might



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have done to make America safer with the time, blood, and treasure expended in Iraq. The *Tribune* simply compared what Bush and his people said then to the facts as we know them now.

I’ll quote mainly from the December 28 editorial, which summarized the series. Much of what the White House said before the war about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction turned out to be “flat-out wrong,” the *Tribune* said. “In putting so much emphasis on illicit weaponry, the White House advanced its most provocative, least verifiable case for war when others would have sufficed.” As for Saddam Hussein’s links to Al Qaeda, “No compelling evidence ties Iraq to Sept. 11, 2001, as the White House implied. . . . By stripping

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section two

The Straight Dope® by Cecil Adams

It's a staple of ghost stories, horror films, spooky TV shows, and creepy books. And I suppose for someone with a heart condition, it may well be true. But can a young, healthy person be literally scared to death, without any physical cause? —Rebecca S., Seattle

its rhetoric of the ambiguity present in the intel data, the White House exaggerated this argument for war." And as for Iraq as a sponsor of terrorism generally, "The argument that Hussein was able to foment global terror against this country and its interests was exaggerated." What American intelligence surmised and the Bush administration believed, the *Tribune* said in its December 7 editorial on Iraq and terrorism, surpassed the "less bombastic facts on the ground." But given the prospect of Hussein selling WMDs to terrorists, the *Tribune* forgave Bush for erring on the side of belligerence.

If you believe the only justification for war is self-defense, you probably believe that if Bush was wrong about WMDs and state-sponsored terrorism his case for invading Iraq falls apart. If so, the only remaining question for the *Tribune* to answer was whether the Bush administration intentionally misled us or—to consider a possibility the *Tribune* didn't allow for when it introduced its series—was itself misled by Hussein's intransigence and its own faulty intelligence. The latter, the *Tribune* believes. The *Tribune* managed to conclude that the case for war still holds up, but it seemed sufficiently humbled by its look backward to drop the polarizing language about one side or the other deceiving the country. In its conclusion it spoke gently of "people of patriotism and integrity" who disagree.

So what were the *Tribune's* reasons for reaffirming Bush's war? It took a second look at that "gauzy vision" it dismissed three years ago. "The White House was correct in predicting that long subjugated Iraqis would embrace democracy," wrote the *Tribune* on December 28. "And while Kurds,

Sunnis and Shiites have major differences to reconcile, a year's worth of predictions that Sunni disaffection could doom self-rule have, so far, proven wrong."

These are sweet but clumsy thoughts. A robust election-day turnout doesn't mean the Iraqis have embraced democracy—it means they're eager to choose their next rulers with the tool at hand. When a government peacefully voted in is peacefully voted out we might be able to say that democracy has taken hold. As for the idea that Sunni disaffection could doom self-rule—well of course it could. All we can say for now is that it hasn't doomed self-rule yet and maybe it never will.

Despite its flaws, I think the *Tribune* series showed the proud owners of Backwards Bush countdown clocks that there was a case for the war we're fighting, and it wasn't something so obviously stupid and mendacious and driven by oil that only fools and scoundrels believed it. The war did something good by booting Hussein and it might do more good yet.

Bush bashers should concede this. Perhaps it occurred to some of them during the *Tribune's* six-week-long project that the paper was testing the purity of water long since over the dam. When I'd finished it I thought, "Good. Now let's move on. Let's debate the war the way it needs to be debated—on how it's been run." From inadequate troop levels to the lack of armor on troop carriers to the brutalizing of prisoners and sacking of independent-minded generals to the shrug that "stuff happens" when liberation gave way to anarchy, the White House has plenty to answer for. The public wants to end this war, but it doesn't want

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For once fiction writers and doctors agree: it's possible to die of fright, or for that matter grief, anger, joy, or just about any other intense emotion. Most victims are older and likely in precarious health to start with, but a few are young—in some cases really young. One British kid, in what is surely a mother's worst nightmare, was reportedly so freaked out by a visit to the dentist in 1970 that she died of a heart attack at age four.

Sudden death due to stress has been reported throughout history. Physician George Engel, in a 1971 review in *Annals of Internal Medicine*, notes that in the New Testament the apostle Peter tells Ananias, "You have lied not to man but to God," whereupon Ananias and later his wife Sapphira fall down dead. For more recent instances Engel over a six-year period compiled press accounts of 170 deaths due to "disrupting life events." Three-fifths involved men, commonly 45 to 55 years old; the peak age for women was 70 to 75. In 27 percent of cases, the largest category, the precipitating event involved fear. Examples: "A 63-year-old security guard died after being bound by robbers.... A woman seeing some teenagers outside her apartment beating and robbing a bus driver died while phoning the police.... A 35-year-old man accused of robbery told his lawyer, 'I'm scared to death!'; then collapsed and died."

As the above may suggest, most of Engel's cases aren't that startling. In fact, the most dramatic story I could come up with after hours of rooting around in the journals involved a hated assistant at a college whom the students pretended to execute: "The assistant was held with his head on the chopping block, eyes bandaged, while one student made the noise of a swinging axe [and] another dropped a warm, wet cloth on his neck. The assistant died instantly."

Yow. But the lack of detail smells to me of urban legend, and others have reached the same conclusion. The typical victim per Engel is a middle-aged male who undergoes a mildly traumatic event and dies within an hour. Not to be callous, but so what? Sudden cardiac death (fatal heart



SLUG SIGNORINO

attack, essentially) is common—roughly 450,000 cases per year in the U.S. excluding deaths in hospitals. Eighty-five to ninety percent of the time the victim has heart disease. Sure, in cases linked to an emotional jolt, maybe stress was a factor; still, the guy usually had problems to start with and at most was pushed over the edge.

The same can often be said about younger people who die suddenly of non-cardiac causes. Engel tells of a 17-year-old boy who collapsed and died at 6 AM, June 4, 1970; exactly one year previously, at 5:12 AM, June 4, 1969, his older brother had died of car-crash injuries. Coincidence or something more? Who knows? Fact is, the kid was done in by hemorrhage following a ruptured aneurysm, a condition arising from birth defect, injury, etc, not fraternal grief. The demise of the four-year-old dental patient is harder to explain, but she'd been sedated to calm her, and anesthesia of the young is inherently risky.

The most interesting scared-to-death cases are what we might call willed deaths. The classic scenario was described by physiologist Walter Cannon in a famous 1942 paper titled "'Voodoo' Death": the victim learns he's eaten taboo food or gets hexed

by a sorcerer, panics, and dies of no obvious organic cause. Many such accounts are hearsay, but clinician Clifton Meador reported two well-documented cases in 1992. In the first, a 60-year-old man was brought to the hospital near death after being cursed by a voodoo priest. The attending physician staged a "cure" in which, through sleight of hand, the victim was persuaded he'd vomited up a live lizard, the embodiment of the curse. He soon recovered and lived ten more years.

OK, this mope's real problem was that, pre-"cure," he was sure he was a goner, stopped eating, and was wasting away from starvation. Case number two resists such easy analysis. Here the patient was a man in his 70s who'd been diagnosed with incurable cancer and told he had only a few months left. Wanting to live till Christmas, he ate and exercised as directed and walked out of the hospital for the holidays much improved. He was readmitted shortly after New Year's close to death and expired within 24 hours. An autopsy found the cancer diagnosis had been exaggerated; his physical complaints weren't enough to kill him. Instead, he and everyone else were convinced he was going to die, so he did.

Comments, questions? Take it up with Cecil on the Straight Dope Message Board, www.straightdope.com, or write him at the Chicago Reader, 11 E. Illinois, Chicago 60611. Cecil's most recent compendium of knowledge, *Triumph of the Straight Dope*, is available at bookstores everywhere.

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