

## FIREBOMBINGS: FROM MY FATHER'S WARS TO MINE

by Christopher Dickey

My father, James Dickey, was a novelist and a poet. First and foremost, that. But he was also a college athlete, a professor, a sometime advertising man, and a warrior, a flyer in World War II, which was an experience that shaped him for the rest of his life. His war—and the idea of war—were something we talked about a lot when I was growing up.

The first poem that I remember him reciting to me about war was a couplet that he repeated often, but it was not one that he wrote:

Pacific Percy thought it wrong to fight,  
But Roaring Bill (who killed him) thought it right.<sup>1</sup>

My father used to repeat those lines from time to time when I was six or seven and he saw that I was worried, as a lot of little kids were in those days, about a nuclear war that would wipe all life off the face of the planet. This was not a fanciful notion. It was all too possible, and seemed very damned imminent in a way that, thank God, it does not today.

In fact, you might think about that as we talk this evening: do the terrors of “terrorism,” even the terrors of madmen with weapons of mass destruction, in any way approximate the collective fear that all Americans shared at the height of the Cold War?

I think not. And it is useful, indeed essential, to ponder the relative scope of fear when we're thinking about how to address the real threats we are up against today.

But I'll get back to that.

When I was a scared little boy, what I'd be thinking, and talking about with Dad, when he'd tell me “Pacific Percy thought it wrong to fight, / But Roaring Bill (who killed him) thought it right,” was that maybe there was some way to stop the *fear* of the Russians—*my* fear of the Russians—without having to go to war and risk the end of all life on the planet.

I was frightened an awful lot of the time there in Atlanta. Remember, this was back when we had nuclear attack drills in our elementary schools. We had to “duck and cover” beneath our desks as a defense against Armageddon. Even as an eight-year-old I didn't find this very convincing protection, and I worried. Who wouldn't? So I'd ask Dad what we could do to be safe from the Russians. “Couldn't we, like, just be *nice* to them?” And my father would shake his head and invoke Roaring Bill. Sometimes, he'd say, you just have to go to war. And always, you got to be ready.

Now, in those days, in the 1950s, there was no question, really, that war was a righteous enterprise. We had just defeated the Nazis and the Japanese war machine, discovering in the process a level of depraved brutality, aided by technology, that many people had refused to believe existed until the gates to Dachau and Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz were pushed open, and the living corpses were freed at last from the stench of the dead. And in the East, the



Japanese prisoners of war, those who survived, began to tell their stories.

If there had been any doubts going into that fight, there certainly were none coming out. We had been attacked by nations bent on world domination. We had fought back. We had won. And God bless.

And yet—and yet—even then there were ghosts haunting my father's generation. They had been, so many of them, so close to the action.

The men who came back from World War II may have been, as Tom Brokaw suggests, "The Greatest Generation," but many were greatly scarred. Historian William Tuttle says many of those fathers coming out of World War II suffered "problems of alcoholism, rage, night terrors, night sweats." Many who'd been on the ground, eyeball to eyeball with the enemy, watching their buddies die around them, and dreaming of those deaths before and after the combat itself, suffered post-traumatic stress before that syndrome had ever been diagnosed.

Of course, in those days most people didn't talk about the tears or the fears. Everybody was just supposed to suck it up, get on with their lives. And it helped—in fact I think we can say it was vital to their survival—that their memory of the war's suffering and brutality was of a just fight for a clear cause that had ended the threat they were up against . . . forever. It also instilled in them a very great respect for the horrors of war, and the need to avoid it if at all possible. Very few soldiers returned from the front lines of the war as Pacific Percys, but just as few were Roaring Bills, and it's a good bet that the Cold War stayed cold not only because of fears, like mine, of an imagined apocalypse, but because so many people making decisions remembered first hand the experiences of World War II.

Now, my father was a flyer, and the war he experienced was different from what the Marines saw at Iwo Jima or the Army encountered on Omaha Beach.

Dad told me war stories when I was growing up, heroic stories about fighting with a gun in his hand in the jungle. But my father, like many fathers, made up a lot of stuff to impress his boys. As I've looked back over his life and his letters, and his poems and his novels, I've come to believe that my father never actually saw a man killed in action.

And that made my father, as a warrior, a man ahead of his time.

This is not to say he didn't see the effects of war. On Okinawa, his squadron was billeted on a battlefield where the Japanese had fought hard and died plentifully. "Everywhere were helmets, canteens, rifles, gas-masks and Japs in various stages of decomposition," he wrote in the squadron history. But if you look at the letters that Dad sent home, he really only talked about seeing the horrors of war as aftermath, and usually only when he was trying to score some sort of moral—or macho—victory over his younger brother, Tom, who was having a great year as a track star back in Atlanta.

"Most of the people in the States are not fit to shake the hand of any of the men on Iwo, Leyte or any of these Pacific deathtraps . . .," my father wrote home to his father in June 1945, after he got a letter about Tom's triumphs as a sprinter:

My God! The people in the United States have little enough to do. They ought to be pushing this thing to the limit and past it. No price is too great. Not just words. Action.

Sorry I got started on this. I had intended to make it more personal. I'm glad Tom did so well at Birmingham.<sup>2</sup>

To his mother, a few days later, my father wrote another letter that began to suggest his own true experience in the war:

I sure am glad I'm in this, and I am glad that I am in the fighting part of it. It sure is wonderful. I look forward to every mission. It has a horrible fascination. It makes everything else seem trivial.<sup>3</sup>

What you see in my father's work that touches on the war is a man trying to come to terms not with what he saw, but with what he did not see: the deaths of friends and of enemies that he did not witness, and could only imagine.

One of his most anthologized poems, and one of his best, is "The Performance," written in the late 1950s, which conceives of the death of another flyer named Donald Armstrong.

Now, just an aside here, because there's been some confusion—some of it created by my father. There was a Donald Armstrong in the 418<sup>th</sup> Night Fighter Squadron, and he was a friend of my father's, and he was killed, although not quite the way it happens in the poem. But the figure in "The Performance" who dies is not the real Armstrong, he is an imaginary projection of my father himself, this would-be athlete who would—or wished he would—defy death and amaze the Japanese swordsman at the last moment with his spontaneous handstand and back somersaults, before he "knelt down in himself / Beside his hacked, glittering grave, having done / All things in this life that he could."<sup>4</sup>

"Drinking from a Helmet," written almost two decades after the war, comes back to the theme of involvement and detachment. The poet is getting water from a truck on a battlefield—again, a place where the fighting is mostly over. Afraid to take off his own helmet, he picks up another one discarded on the ground. As he drinks from it he comes to think it belonged to another soldier who has died. He sees his own boyish reflection in the water.

Selected ripples rove through it,  
Knocked loose with a touch from all sides  
Of a brain killed early that morning,  
Most likely, and now in its absence holding  
My sealed, sunny image from harm.<sup>5</sup>

He becomes fascinated by a growing sense that he knows the life of this soldier he never knew, whose death he never saw. "I stood as though I possessed / A cool, trembling man / Exactly my size, swallowed whole."<sup>6</sup> Putting the helmet on, the poet's mind joins with that of the dead man, who is resurrected – reincarnated—in him.

"Drinking from a Helmet" is a good poem, but it only just began to address that deep unease my father had about the war: about the way he *had* experienced it and at the same time *had not* experienced it.

It was only in his poem "The Firebombing" that he found, at last, the perfect voice to address his confused and conflicted emotions as an American survivor of the war living in a well-mowed quarter-acre housing development twenty years afterward, trying to comprehend what he had wrought on other human beings whom he did not know, and never saw.

At my father's poetry readings, he'd usually give a pretty long introduction to this poem

“which attempts to come to terms with modern warfare and with the fact that for many people engaged in modern warfare there is no guilt, because guilt depends ultimately on contemplating the destruction that one is responsible for.

“So much destruction in modern war takes place miles and miles away from the source of the destruction, the human being who has caused it,” my father would explain to the audience. “The man in this poem has been twenty years ago a bomber pilot and has made firebombing raids on civilian populations over Japan. He is a decent fellow, like most pilots were, and are, and he’s thinking now twenty years later in his pleasant suburban home that he is the same person who burned women and children alive with jellied gasoline called napalm.”<sup>7</sup>

The poet-flyer-narrator is overweight, and he’s standing in his tract-house kitchen pantry wondering, in fact, if he can resist the temptation of some snack food or another, when suddenly, in an emotional rush, the enormity of what he’s done during the war comes over him, especially what he did one night when he took part in the firebombing of a resort town called Beppu on the island of Kyushu. It must have been one of those elegant Japanese cities where most of the houses were of wood and paper, set among ponds and rice fields with shallow water reflecting the sky, and then the flames.

It’s a long poem and this is just a brief excerpt. But this is the poet—this is, really, my father—remembering what it was like to be thousands of feet in the night sky unleashing horrific destruction:

Death will not be what it should;  
 Will not, even now, even when  
 My exhaled face in the mirror  
 Of bars, dilates in a cloud like Japan.  
 The death of children is ponds  
 Shutter-flashing; responding mirrors; it climbs  
 The terraces of hills  
 Smaller and smaller, a mote of red dust  
 At a hundred feet; at a hundred and one it goes out.  
 That is what should have got in  
 To my eye

And shown the insides of houses, the low table  
 Catch fire from the floor mats,  
 Blaze up in gas around their heads  
 Like a dream of suddenly growing  
 Too intense for war. Ah, under one’s dark arms  
 Something strange-scented falls—when those on earth  
 Die, there is not even sound;  
 One is cool and enthralled in the cockpit,  
 Turned blue by the power of beauty, in a pale treasure-hole of soft light  
 Deep in aesthetic contemplation,  
 Seeing the ponds catch fire  
 And cast it through ring after ring  
 Of land: O death in the middle of acres of inch-deep water! Useless

Firing small arms  
 Speckles from the river  
 Bank one ninety-millimeter  
 Misses far down wrong petals gone

It is this detachment,  
 The honored aesthetic evil,  
 The greatest sense of power in one's life,  
 That must be shed in bars, or by whatever  
 Means, by starvation  
 Visions in well-stocked pantries.<sup>8</sup>



For more than fifty years after World War II, and more than thirty years after my father wrote that poem, technology, especially American technology, continued to dehumanize the inhumanity of war until, by the late 1990s, we were able to convince ourselves, at our great distance from the destruction, that such a thing could be waged as a war that was humane.

Now, that's a pretty dangerous concept if you think about it. Because a humane war, especially one waged from a sanitary distance, is implicitly an EASY war. It doesn't have to be righteous. It doesn't even have to be *memorable*.

Indeed, it's clear that many of our wars in the recent past were waged, not least, to purge the memories of an earlier conflict—Vietnam. That painful debacle looked easy at the beginning, but eventually became a nightmare of impotence and frustration, slaughter and dissent, a place where the fighting and dying on the ground brought on post traumatic syndrome for the soldiers, and for the nation, and with no sense of righteousness to heal the wound.

Have you ever heard the term “fire and forget”?

“Fire and forget” is a bit of military jargon that describes, say, an anti-tank missile that does the work of tracking and hitting the target by itself once you pull the trigger. The munitions the Air Force and Navy use today, the “smart bombs” and cruise missiles, might also fit into that same category. It's about guidance systems. But “fire and forget” could just as aptly describe the way the United States makes war and the American people have learned to perceive it in the last quarter century. And it tells us a lot about some of the misguided fights we've gotten into of late.

Since 1981, we have carried out an act of war, on average, just about every year. And, as it happens, as a foreign correspondent—a war correspondent—I've been in the middle of a lot of them. But who really remembered the Gulf of Sidra, Grenada, Nicaragua, Lebanon, Syria, Libya, Iran's oil installations and Iran Air 655, Panama, Somalia, repeated attacks on Iraq after the first Gulf War—in 1993, 1996, 1998—or Haiti, Sudan, Afghanistan, special ops in Bosnia, bombing Serbia and Kosovo, Afghanistan again, and several actions that I'm sure that even I have forgotten?

Much more than movie violence, the real stuff numbed people, bored them, and left them oddly complacent as we went into Gulf War II (which was actually III, but who

remembers?). We'd been lulled by all that went before, thinking somehow this fight, too, could be and would be emotionally cost-free.

In the fire-and-forget wars of the preceding 22 years, thanks largely to improved air power, few Americans got hurt. In some cases none did. During the Kosovo War there were 58 days of air raids, 38,000 sorties, and not a single American was lost in combat.

Under such circumstances the enemy casualty counts become "acceptable," as the Pentagon likes to say. Which is to say acceptable to us. War becomes just one factoid among many, disappearing as fast as those headlines that crawl across the bottom of the screen on all-news TV channels.

By the mid-1990s you could see where this attitude was taking us. War was no longer a righteous undertaking for a great cause. Nor was it a cautionary experience adding wisdom to the judgment of our current leaders. Sometimes it was almost an afterthought. Can't figure out what to do with Muammar Qadhafi? Or Osama bin Laden? Bomb 'em. Then see what happens.<sup>9</sup>

On the eve of the latest war in Iraq, it seemed to me, there was a collective sense of resignation in the United States, a weird mixture of unreality and invincibility a little like the way Arnold J. Toynbee once recalled the mood at the height of the British Empire, when he was a child during Queen Victoria's jubilee:

"Well, here we are at the top of the world and we have arrived at this peak to stay there—forever! There is, of course, a thing called history, but history is something unpleasant that happens to other people."<sup>10</sup>

Of course, that was in the era of Queen Victoria's little wars, which most Britons didn't bother themselves about for any great length of time. And it was before Britain lost hundreds of thousands of men and experienced a very great deal of history in the World Wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945.

You know, history does not end except, perhaps, in academic theory. But if you ignore the past, if you refuse to connect cause and effect, and you start to think that war is without consequences—at least for you in your comfortable suburban home—then war can come to seem perfunctory, even trivial, except for those who are on the ground beneath the bombs.

In the 1980s and 1990s I tried to break through this American sense of detachment. I was writing from the front before and during and after our many little wars, and in article after article I tried to give some sense of the anger building against the United States.

I got so frustrated and so concerned, trying to reach out to a public generally unconcerned with "world affairs," I even wrote a novel called *Innocent Blood*, about why and how terror might be brought to American shores. "In America," says the villain, "you don't feel what you do. You are in the eye of a hurricane that you create. Pain and suffering and injustice all over the world, and all you see is blue skies."<sup>11</sup> There cannot be peace on earth, he argues, until America has felt that pain, too.

Those lines were written in 1994 and published in 1997, and they reflect exactly the thinking of Osama bin Laden and his followers. (Well, I like to think they're a little better written than those diatribes.)

In the end, the narrator of *Innocent Blood*, who is initially part of the conspiracy, does not go through with it. Why? Because as an American born and bred who understands his

country, he thinks that even if he kills tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Americans, somehow the message would be lost, and, yes, forgotten.

You see, and I say this just as a matter of fact, what Americans really, *really* want from the rest of the world is to forget about it.

My father understood that in the kitchen pantry of our house in Atlanta forty years ago. And any foreign correspondent knows it's true. Our fellow citizens are no longer imbued with missionary zeal, no longer seeking the next frontier. And even when they were, there were sensible pangs of doubt. As the Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner pointed out in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, expansion and imperialism are inimical to what, precisely, we Americans think we are. They are "a grand onslaught on democracy," said Sumner, they are "at war with the best traditions, principles, and interests of the American people."<sup>12</sup>

Generally, Americans—and their leaders—have understood this, which is why, despite the present administration's rhetoric about spreading democracy, the heart of its message has been quite different since September 11: not that we will change the world, but that, in the end, the world will not change us.

That is why it was so important to get the message out, unofficially and meretriciously, that Saddam Hussein was behind September 11. That is why it's important that some sixty per cent of the public think that's the case. Because if it is not, then we have embarked on exactly that kind of expansionist and imperialist project our forebears warned us against, and we see that this war in Iraq could change us every bit as much as we're likely to change the world.

The media have played a strange role in all this, becoming technological accomplices in a grand illusion. During the main combat operations in Iraq in March and April, the public—and the reporters themselves—were mesmerized by the tank-cameras racing through the Iraqi desert.

We correspondents shared in a lot of false assumptions about this fight. Despite all the cautionary tales that we told the world and ourselves, we'd been seduced by the notion the Iraqis would welcome the invasion as a liberation.

They had not.

We thought they'd do what we remembered them doing in 1991, when they took the first chance to rise up against Saddam.

They did not.

And not only because they faced ferocious repression if they did. But because they remembered the last war differently. The people on the ground always do.

Over the past twenty years the Pentagon has developed techniques to deluge the press with official information and limit access to anything else. And it's pretty good at it. So as a result, at least since Libya in 1986, America's little shoot-'em-ups have been covered as if they were sports events—our team, their team, we play, we win, we leave—or even video games, with all that gun-camera footage shot from the cool distance of several thousand feet and targets disappearing in silent blazes of white light.

Indeed, anyone with a television suddenly has found himself, as my father wrote, "cool and enthralled in the cockpit / Turned blue by the power of beauty, in a pale treasure-hole of soft light / Deep in aesthetic contemplation, / Seeing the ponds catch fire." Or watching the desert bloom with flame.

For years, we in the press have played right along with this video-friendly orchestration. It certainly is easier to take a video feed from the Pentagon than to dodge a bullet and, in many



cases, the feed makes for better television. The result on the home front is a reassuring sense of excitement, even gratification and, finally, of closure. When the video ends, for most of us, so does the war.

If you've been on the ground at the receiving end of those American bombs, however, among the people who won't forget, don't get closure and can't just change the channel, you know that much of the hatred of the United States in the world comes not from those leaders who are "jealous" of its strength, as some in Washington would have us believe, and not from people who "hate freedom," certainly, but from those innocent people who've either been victims of America's awesome, insouciant power, or fear that they might be.

In Gulf War II, the system of "embeds" with reporters assigned to combat units all over the front—very quickly gave the impression we were seeing everything that happened on the battlefield. There was a steady flow of images and reporting about the American and British men and women who did the initial fighting. But the sense this coverage gave of totality was deeply misleading. All those live feeds created the impression of a whole mosaic when what we saw, in fact, was an occasional mosaic tile here or there. The target audience among the targets, the Iraqis themselves and the people of the Arab and Muslim world, labored under no such illusions. On the fourth day of the war, newspapers all over the Middle East, Europe and Asia ran a picture of a little Iraqi boy with half his head blown away. While you were watching shows about victory, the rest of the world was looking at news about victims.



So here we are, or rather, *therewe* are, in Iraq facing an increasingly hostile population and, indeed, an increasingly hostile world.

What the hell are we going to do about it?

I don't have a comprehensive answer, but perhaps I can make a few helpful suggestions. My father was right, it won't help just to be nice to the enemy. We're going to have to do a lot of killing, and there's going to be a lot of people who want to kill us, and some will succeed.

But there are things we can do to make this war more successful, more "right," if you will, while making wars rarer in the future and bringing our own fears under control.

For starters, let's abandon this idea of a "war on terror." Righteous wars may be based on lofty ideals, but they are fought on the ground against governments, organizations and individuals. To do otherwise—to fight against a notional (that's notional, not national) enemy is to leave open the possibility, quite literally, of war without end.

One of the problems as we went into Iraq was not only self-delusion about the reception we'd receive. It was the apparent belief that this was just one battle in a long twilight war fought over ideological issues with no real end in sight. And, perhaps, no end intended. Why? I can only guess at the administration's motives. But I can tell you this is a bad idea.

The War on Terror is not a battle plan, nor even a policy, it is a doctrine, which wise men in other eras, like the above-cited William Graham Sumner, sagely warned us against. "Doctrines are the most frightful tyrants to which men ever are subject, because doctrines get inside of a man's own reason and betray him against himself," says Sumner. A doctrine, he tells us, is:

an abstract principle; it is necessarily absolute in its scope and abstruse in its terms;



it is a metaphysical assertion. It is never true, because it is absolute, and the affairs of men are all conditioned and relative. . . . Just think what an abomination in statecraft an abstract doctrine must be. Any politician or editor can, at any moment, put a new extension on it. The people acquiesce in the doctrine and applaud it because they hear the politicians and editors repeat it, and the politicians and editors repeat it because they think it is popular. So it grows.<sup>13</sup>

Sound familiar?

Sumner was writing a little more than a hundred years ago, before the age of psychobabble. But I found a sort of corollary in the Columbia Encyclopedia, which talked about “persistent, unalterable, systematized, logically reasoned delusions, or false beliefs, usually of persecution or grandeur. In the former case the [subject] creates a complex delusional system that purports to show that people want to hurt him; in the latter, he sees himself as an exalted person with a mission of great importance.”

You see where we’re headed here. . . . Just a bit more from the encyclopedia: “Jealousy and vengeful emotions are also common, and can lead to violent confrontation in the most severe cases. . . . The individual believes that there is a pattern to random events which is somehow connected to him.”<sup>14</sup>

You guessed it. We’re talking about paranoia and paranoids. Not us, of course. Not our government. We’ve got real enemies, no doubt about that. (Even paranoids do.) But here’s the point: a rational policy identifies enemies and threats on the basis of solid evidence, not on the basis of what Secretary Rumsfeld described, so weirdly and so unforgettably, as “unknown unknowns.”<sup>15</sup>

If we had been pursuing a war on Al Qaeda relentlessly and with complete focus we could have *won* that war by now. Indeed, we might have been able to declare victory in January, when we had crushed the Taliban, destroyed Al Qaeda’s Afghan infrastructure, and rounded up most of the major plotters who put together September 11.

Sure, some risks would have remained. Some big risks. But we’d be on our way to keeping them in perspective. And we wouldn’t have launched another needless war based on hypothetical concerns.

Ask yourself, what is the scale of the terrorist menace we’re up against? Is it in any way comparable to the threat posed by the Japanese or Germans in World War II? Or the Cold War menace of mutual assured destruction? No. Is there any way the terrorists can present an *existential* threat to Americans? No. Not on their own.

But the *doctrine* of an endless, corrosive “war on terror” that is unwinnable because victory is not and cannot be defined, that truly does undermine a great deal that we think we believe in, especially if it leads to ill-considered “pre-emptions.”

Before you launch a war, it’s prudent to figure out what winning really means. You wouldn’t send a football team out on the field to play with no scoreboard, no time limit, no yard lines—hell, no goalposts! But that’s what we’ve done with our soldiers, and this is no game. The most amazing thing about that Rumsfeld letter leaked to the press a couple of months ago was not the revelation that the war in Iraq will be a long hard slog. Didn’t everybody know that after this summer? If there was a surprise it was Rumsfeld’s confession that he didn’t know how to measure victory or defeat in the war on terror. Didn’t have the “metrics” for it, as he said.<sup>16</sup>

Come on, let's not even think about starting a fight where our own notion of winning is an unknown unknown. Let's declare the war on terror over and get down to the business of fighting real enemies on real battlefields based on real intelligence.

A corollary suggestion: let's be honest with ourselves about the difficulties ahead. Anyone who tries to tell you that humanity's clock can be turned back and the world remade just as it was on September 10, 2001—that someone is trying to deceive you, and very probably himself. We are in a tough new world with some tough battles to come, but let's not make things worse than they are.

In the specific case of Iraq, subduing the Sunni triangle and the rest of the increasingly restive country is going to require some variation on the same brutal program pursued in every counterinsurgency campaign that ever worked. The guerrillas are going to have to be separated from the population, and to do that sometimes force is going to have to be used not only on the guerrillas but on the people. The basic, savage lesson is always the same: "We can protect you from the guerrillas, but the guerrillas cannot protect you from us." Of course, sometimes you win hearts and minds with your ideas, your money, and your political program. But sometimes you have to follow that old adage, "Grab 'em by the balls and their hearts and minds will follow." That's where we're headed now. Let's hope we get through that phase quickly, because it sure ain't pretty—and it may not even be possible with 24/7 news coverage. We'll see.

But, no, we can't just get out. The United States is a great power with great power to do good. It was incredibly foolish to pick this fight, which is why so many in the uniformed military, the CIA and the State Department argued against it. But now that we've created this chaos in Iraq and the region, we can't just walk away from it.

Political realists have always understood that power used unwisely, even superpower or hyperpower, is power squandered. And they've also understood something that this administration chose to ignore when it simply defied the international community on every issue from Kyoto to the invasion of Iraq. As Hans J. Morgenthau wrote in *Politics Among Nations*, which was once required reading for International Relations 101, "the power of the police officer who searches me by virtue of a search warrant is qualitatively different from the power of a robber who performs the same action by virtue of his holding a gun."<sup>17</sup> This distinction between legitimate and illegitimate power has been blurred, and badly, by the actions of the United States these last three years, and that makes it harder, still, to restore the order we want and need.

In this new universe of unknowns, we're all going to have to work harder, much harder, to understand the way the rest of the world functions, speaks, thinks. This is a job for the media, to be sure, but the core responsibility lies with our institutions of higher education.

Someday, I hope, I really do, we Americans can go back to our cherished obliviousness. But right now, we have to make a real effort to learn about the way other human beings in other societies speak and think and feel: other human beings who have values, who have families, who have histories, who have faiths, who have dignity and their own standards for upholding it.

Dignity.

Somewhere in the high-tech war machine that we've created, that concept has been lost. Yet what is it that men fight for, even against incredible odds? Even in the face of certain defeat?

Honor. Pride. Dignity.

You strip your enemy of his dignity and he's not just your enemy today, he's your enemy for life.

Yet when was the last time you heard anybody in the American administration, either in Washington or in Baghdad, talking seriously about the dignity of the Iraqis themselves?<sup>18</sup> At best the tone is half-surprised and wholly patronizing: "The Iraqis really are very capable people. How about that?" At worst, it's contemptuous, like the American soldier shouting at women cutting in line outside a Baghdad hospital, "What part of no don't you understand?" The answer, of course, is no part, since they don't speak English.

To me, the most striking example of America humiliating needlessly the people it was supposed to liberate lies in the number of Iraqi civilians who were killed in major combat operations. You know how many there were? You do not. Because the US government didn't even try to count them.

Now, very probably, and perhaps surprisingly after all the shock and awe that rained on Baghdad, the number of Iraqi civilians killed was low. We think possibly as few as 4,000. It's doubtful there were more than 10,000. And the number was low for a reason. Those smart bombs really are smart. Our air raids were phenomenally accurate, and as military tools today's air-dropped munitions have nothing to do with the anti-morale, anti-personnel weapons dropped by my father over Japan, or by a later generation over Hanoi.

The invasion of Iraq was planned very carefully to minimize civilian casualties. And—let's be clear about this—compared to the carnage wrought by Saddam in years past, the number of people killed by the US pales into insignificance, as numbers go. You will notice the US government keeps issuing new numbers, by the way, for those dead that were slaughtered by the Baathists.

But not those killed by us.

The official US position is that for some reason, even though we can count the graves of people killed more than a decade ago by Saddam, we cannot and will not enumerate the Iraqi dead killed by the United States earlier this year—read, won't bother.

What could be more humiliating to the relatives of the people who died? Those same people we set out to liberate?

And how does an Iraqi win back his dignity?

Some do it by killing an American.

And now, that happens at least once every day.

Sometimes you just got to go to war, my father taught me. Well, we didn't have to go to war in Iraq, but now we're there, and we're only going to get out with our own honor intact if we know clearly what victory means. Declaring a triumph and walking away won't do the job. We need to make peace where we have created chaos, restore sanity out of madness. And that's only going to be possible if we end the thousand humiliations that the Iraqis experience at our hands, and we treat the enemy—and, indeed, our friends as well—with dignity.

We have come full circle now. We are no longer cool and enthralled in the cockpit. We are on the ground, face to face with real people.

Pacific Percy thought it wrong to fight,  
But Roaring Bill (who killed him) thought it right.

In the real world, if war is to be righteous, paradoxically, it has to be based on more than

righteousness. It has to be waged with limited objectives, with common sense, and with a determination to preserve the humanity not only of the victors, but of the vanquished, and thus, ultimately, of ourselves.

### Notes

1. James Dickey never claimed to have written these lines, but neither did he attribute them. After I gave this speech at Clemson, a member of the faculty and a student in the audience both found the appropriate reference. The couplet was written by Hilaire Belloc under the title "The Pacifist," but begins with the name of one "Pale Ebenezer." I confess I've grown to prefer the Pacific Percy of the Dickey version.
2. This and other references to the letters are drawn from the texts of those now in the Emory University collection, as cited in *The One Voice of James Dickey: His Letters and Life, 1942-1969*, edited with commentary by Gordon Van Ness, University of Missouri Press, 2003. This particular letter was post-marked June 5, 1945, and sent from the Philippines. It appears on pp. 87-88.
3. Van Ness, p. 89. In this letter, too, my father couldn't keep from sniping at his brother: "It sure seems funny for Tom to be worried about how far he throws his left arm down the track and running the 100 in one tenth of second faster when I have seen airplanes going 500 m.p.h. crash into each other and guys all shot to hell, and guts hanging out and dead Japs lying rotten in the sun. "I am glad Tom is not in this, though. I don't think he'd like it."
4. *James Dickey: The Selected Poems*, edited with an introduction by Robert Kirschten, Wesleyan University Press, 1998, p. 23.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 64
7. Transcribed from the LP "The Poems of James Dickey (1957-1967)," directed by Arthur Luce Klein, Spoken Arts, 1967.
8. *Selected Poems*, pp. 73-74
9. What happened after the bombing of Libya in 1986, in fact, was a series of ferocious attacks by Libyan-backed terrorists against Americans and Britons – who had never been Qadhafi's targets before. Those attacks included Pan Am 103. And yet, the bombing of Libya was recorded in America's counter-terrorist mythology as a great success. The 1998 bombing of Osama bin Laden's Afghan training camps, after his operatives blew up the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania was completely ineffectual.
10. As cited by C. Vann Woodward in his essay "The Irony of Southern History," *The Burden of Southern History*, revised edition, New American Library (Mentor Book), 1968, p. 135.
11. *Innocent Blood: A Novel*, by Christopher Dickey, Simon & Schuster, 1997, p. 212
12. "The Conquest of the United States by Spain," lecture delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Yale University, Jan. 16, 1899, and published in the *Yale Law Journal* (Jan. 1899). *War and Other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911). Online see <[http://www.boondocksnet.com/ai/ailtexts/wgsumner\\_d.html](http://www.boondocksnet.com/ai/ailtexts/wgsumner_d.html)>.
13. "War," *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, Yale University Press, 1934, Vol. 1, p. 169, as cited in *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Fourth Edition, by Hans J. Morgenthau, Knopf, 1967, p. 540.  
Morgenthau makes very interesting reading these days. His rules of political realism, especially those concerning the nature of power and of diplomacy, still make good sense. The Sumner quotation is cited under the first of "Four Fundamental Rules": "Diplomacy must be divested of the crusading spirit." The others are: "Give up the shadow of worthless rights for the substance of real advantage"; "Never put yourself in a position from which you cannot retreat without losing face and from which you cannot advance without grave risks"; "Never allow a weak ally to make decisions for you." Alas, all those rules appear to have been forgotten in the last few years.
14. As cited under the definition of "paranoia" on <<http://www.bartleby.com>>.
15. Donald Rumsfeld. Press Conference. NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium. 6 June 2002. Transcript. <<http://www.nato.int/usa/dod/s20020606a.html>>. The phrase "unknown unknowns" has been cited so often, one might think it's being taken out of context. In fact, even after the main combat operations were over, other U.S. officials would argue the reason for war was not what we

knew, but what we didn't know, about Saddam's weapons stockpiles. In that context, it's worth looking at the whole Rumsfeld passage from the previous year, as the drums for war with Iraq were beginning to reverberate loudly along the Potomac:

Q: Regarding terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, you said something to the effect that the real situation is worse than the facts show. I wonder if you could tell us what is worse than is generally understood.

Rumsfeld: Sure. All of us in this business read intelligence information. And we read it daily and we think about it and it becomes, in our minds, essentially what exists. And that's wrong. It is not what exists.

I say that because I have had experiences where I have gone back and done a great deal of work and analysis on intelligence information and looked at important countries, target countries, looked at important subject matters with respect to those target countries and asked, probed deeper and deeper and kept probing until I found out what it is we knew, and when we learned it, and when it actually had existed. And I found that, not to my surprise, but I think anytime you look at it that way what you find is that there are very important pieces of intelligence information that countries, that spend a lot of money, and a lot of time with a lot of wonderful people trying to learn more about what's going in the world, did not know some significant event for two years after it happened, for four years after it happened, for six years after it happened, in some cases 11 and 12 and 13 years after it happened.

Now what is the message there? The message is that there are no "knowns." There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know. So when we do the best we can and we pull all this information together, and we then say well that's basically what we see as the situation, that is really only the known knowns and the known unknowns. And each year, we discover a few more of those unknown unknowns.

It sounds like a riddle. It isn't a riddle. It is a very serious, important matter.

There's another way to phrase that and that is that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. It is basically saying the same thing in a different way. Simply because you do not have evidence that something exists does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn't exist. And yet almost always, when we make our threat assessments, when we look at the world, we end up basing it on the first two pieces of that puzzle, rather than all three.

16. Bradley Graham. "Rumsfeld Questions Anti-Terrorism Efforts." *The Washington Post* 23 Oct. 2003: A1.
17. Morgenthau, p. 30
18. In fact, just about the time I was writing this speech, "dignity" started to be a buzzword in U.S. administration rhetoric. J. Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad, used it some 27 times in his Ramadan address to the Iraqi people on Nov. 7, 2003. President George W. Bush referred to it when he stopped in at Baghdad airport for Thanksgiving. But the standards they set for dignity, unfortunately, are theirs for the Iraqis, not necessarily the Iraqis' for themselves.

## MARGARET MUIRHEAD

## NIGHT SWIMMING AT WALDEN

We parked in the lot  
across the highway  
and schlepped the stroller  
loaded with boxes of cereal  
and towels and shoes and  
we carried the baby. The cops  
had a barricade—they  
were sending everyone home.  
But the Concord old-timers  
whispered advice  
as we passed. *Wait in the woods  
until it's dear.* Everyone here  
believes in civil disobedience.

At night you can almost forget  
the little replica house and parking  
lots A, B, C, and D and the bathhouse  
and the ropes around the shallows.  
Even with a moon it's black  
and you can't see the company  
you're keeping, only hear it:  
some small laughter and someone's  
arm licking the surface of water.  
I waded into the ink and floated,  
having the kind of thoughts  
people have about how good,  
just how good it is for a moment  
to be without a body.

But as the baby says *if that  
moon isn't following us  
then it sure has a lot of friends.*  
It was your voice coming  
from shore, calling me in.