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Selling War

Steven J. Alvarez

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SELLING WAR

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SELLING WAR

A Critical Look at the Military's PR Machine

STEVEN J. ALVAREZ

POTOMAC BOOKS

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*This book is dedicated to
all the U.S. military veterans who fought the war in
Iraq; all these veterans' families who courageously
waited for their return;
my Iraqi public affairs colleagues who daily tried
to tell the story of their nation to a world that
oftentimes could not hear them;
and the millions of Iraqis whose lives have been
adversely affected by the U.S. invasion.*

*Above all this book is for my wife, Rosemary,
whose enduring love and support filled my soul's
rucksack and sustained me throughout my tour as
she endured her own private, tortuous, and lonely
hell for a year. To Cannon, Holden, McKenna, and
Duncan, I hope someday your children will inherit
a world far better and safer than the one I have
tried to give to you.*

—The Phoenix PAO

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PREFACE

I couldn't sleep early one spring morning in 2003. I was an Army Reserve officer sitting on the sidelines of my professional part-time military life, restlessly waiting to be called into the game: the war in Afghanistan and the pickup game the United States had started in Iraq. In the aftermath of 9/11, I knew going off to war was a question of when, not if. Even before 9/11 at the Defense Information School (DINFOS) at Fort Meade, Maryland, we were told by our instructors that if we were in the Army Reserve and serving as public affairs officers, we would likely deploy to operations in Kosovo or Haiti or to the Middle East in support of UN sanctions against Iraq. More than 85 percent of the Army's public affairs assets at that time were in the reserve.

I was a public affairs officer, known as a PAO in the ranks. PAOs are public relations (PR) guys in uniform. They are charged, in a nutshell, with selling war, although most of them would offer more glamorous job descriptions if asked. From the looks of things months after Iraq's "liberation," there'd be a lot to sell.

I sat in my home office grading papers from a college journalism course I was teaching as an adjunct faculty member. By the glow of the television I worked, occasionally looking up to watch the Fox News report that was on the air. Fox News war coverage was on at all hours of the day, so it was by default that it was on my television. Then I saw a familiar face on the television screen. It was Fox News reporter Greg Kelly, my classmate from the Defense Information School. We had attended PAO training together a few years earlier after Greg traded in his fighter-jet yoke for a handheld microphone. He decided to pursue a career in broadcast journalism, so he

left the active-duty Marine Corps to become a Marine Corps Reserve PAO. The guy I knew as a Harrier jet aviator who wouldn't wear his uniform hat because it messed up his hair (something he readily admitted) was riding shotgun with U.S. troops as they crossed the border and fought their way into Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein.

There seemed to be on every channel an embedded journalist like Greg reporting from the front lines. Prior U.S. wars had seen problems between the press and the military, two professions rooted and protected in the U.S. Constitution. I hoped this war would be different, and days into it there were little signs of trouble. Politics aside and professionally speaking, the press had not challenged the call to invade Iraq, and they were along for the ride, literally and figuratively. That nonchallenging posture always made the jobs of PAOs much easier. The press was all over the battlefield, embedded with U.S. military units. Defense Department officials estimate that more than seven hundred reporters were embedded in the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Before long Hussein's statue was toppled in a dusty Baghdad square, and Iraqis danced in the streets. Coalition troops were heroes, and international press reports buzzed about the success of the liberation. The world was punch drunk that Hussein was on the run and Iraq was free. But by late 2003, a few months after U.S. president George W. Bush prematurely announced an end to major combat operations in Iraq on the deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, attacks on coalition forces increased.

I watched from afar as the dynamics of the war began to change. Violence began to take a daily toll in Iraq on U.S. forces, and then as suddenly as a dust storm forms, the paradigm shifted and more Iraqi civilians were becoming casualties. An insurgency had formed, and anyone with a beef against the United States could come to Iraq and kill Americans. Ideologically motivated terrorists or anyone looking to earn a living as a mercenary found plenty of opportunity in Iraq if killing was their trade. Even Iraqis with no beef against the Americans could make a killing, no pun intended, by planting bombs, firing a mortar or rocket, or shooting at U.S. soldiers. We had unknowingly created a marketplace for mischief.

There was also a shift by U.S. communicators from tactical information management to a broader, more strategic operation. The journalists' embeds, a tactical information effort, had yielded remarkable strategic results, but in 2004, with little meaningful public relations products coming from the ranks, senior civilian leaders and U.S. military communicators centralized informational control in Baghdad.

Information would now be propagated from behind the blast walls of the Green Zone. For example, the capture of enemy forces might take place in the northern city of Mosul, but it was Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) spokespersons in the Green Zone who would brief the press about the operation. Reporters were told about what happened; they were not shown what was happening. This was in sharp contrast to the embed operation that had reporters covering the war at the operational level where boots meet the ground. As the CPA pushed to control the U.S. military's public relations operation, gloomy news reports from around Iraq began to bubble up in nonmainstream media forums sharply contrasting the CPA's press conferences in the Green Zone, which were chest-beating, feel-good events designed to evoke feelings of U.S. accomplishment and progress in Iraq. Many Iraqis complained that security in Iraq had worsened since the U.S. invasion, and some studies indicated that at least one hundred thousand Iraqis had died between 2003 and 2004 as a result of the invasion.

Stateside, I wondered why the CPA wasn't informing Iraqis of the progress being made in Iraq. Something didn't seem right. The CPA was telling the world about all this great progress, yet there were images of squalor, violence, and dismay in just about every news publication and on every channel. In addition, why was the CPA hell-bent on selling progress in Iraq to Americans? It seemed like the CPA was briefing the wrong audience. I was starting to get a whiff of U.S. propaganda, but it never occurred to me the CPA was increasing their rhetoric about U.S. progress in Iraq to drown out the cries and concerns of Iraqis—nobody would do that, I thought. We have our flaws, but as Americans we'd never do that. I'd learn I was wrong.

Because information operations were centralized in Baghdad, the CPA had the floor and the microphone; they were in control. As U.S. forces

ushered in 2004 in Iraq, the military slice-of-life news stories that had prevailed in mass media since 2003 were disappearing because of the CPA's tightly held rein on the communications operation. Small U.S. successes showcased by embedded press, and critical in maintaining public opinion, were all but extinct because the CPA had corralled reporters. If reporters wanted information about operations in Iraq, there was only one place to get it, in the Green Zone's convention center, where slick corporate-style contracted marketers, military PAOs, and administration cronies tried to convince the world that Iraq was in good hands.

Some Western reporters, having learned the lessons of a tightly regulated press corps in Operation Desert Storm, attended CPA press briefings but sent Arab stringers into the streets to verify the veracity of reports coming from the PAO or spokesperson at the podium. Most CPA claims were easily disproved. News reports began to reveal huge discrepancies between CPA assertions and Iraqi realities. The Arab media, distrustful of U.S. military PAOs and unimpressed with American reporters, whom they felt didn't show the Arab perspective in their stories, a belief dating back to Desert Storm, led the assault against the U.S. military's claims of utopia in Iraq.

From the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom the Arab media gunned for an unvarnished angle that focused mostly on Iraqi civilian deaths and on Arab suffering at the hands of U.S. forces. Arab suffering, an underreported issue in Western media, was the central theme. As the Arab press roused the Pan-Arab world with stories of Arab anguish, the CPA obsessively talked to the American press. PAOs were concerned more with improving U.S. public opinion about the war in Iraq and protecting the administration's reputation. PAOs and U.S. communicators were not concerned with using information to help save American and Iraqi lives by improving conditions on the ground in Iraq. While the coalition didn't ignore the Arab media completely, the bulk of the effort was directed at the Western press. The leftover scraps, I'd learn, would go to the Arab press.

Information could have served as a tourniquet in Iraq. With information an informed Iraqi people could have slowed, if not stopped, the societal and cultural violence in their world. There is a direct link between information

operations and influencing public opinion. The U.S. Defense Department knows that information operations on the battlefield are critical to operational success in a fight against insurgents just as much as diplomacy is needed with military power. The Defense Department knows this and spent hundreds of millions of dollars trying to find the right public relations formula for Iraq, with very little success. While informing Iraqis certainly wouldn't have prevented an all-out insurgency, strong evidence suggests the lack of a sustainable contingency communications plan hastened the insurgency's ability to take root. U.S. military leaders have stated that successful information operations are critical to a counterinsurgency, but my time in Iraq showed me that few, if any, in the U.S. military and in the U.S. government understand how to successfully conduct information operations using factual, accurate information in public relations operations.

Journalist and media critic Walter Lippmann hypothesized that the bulk of a society is usually governed by an elite few who are educated bureaucrats with a bigger picture in their minds of what is best for the populace. Those who are governed are referred to as the "herd" and in essence are told what to think by the elitist class, who overlook local issues and strive for the better good of the collective mass. Lippmann believed that if 80 percent of the populace or the herd was not told what to do or how to think by the elites, the herd would develop its own opinions and chaos would rule.

Although a model like Lippmann's can be construed as outrageous and elitist, it is sobering, and his position is very much what American society has become in the millennium with its two-party system and politicians who are paid to vote their conscience and take liberties with their powers in the name of the people they represent. Americans are told what to think given limited choices on issues. Americans are mostly pro-this or anti-that, Left or Right. There are few options for Americans to truly develop and practice individualistic, independent, and moderate ideals. Marketers, public relations professionals, politicians, lobbyists, and communicators control American cultural habits. They tell us what to buy, how to think, and how to live, and they do it by spending more than \$100 billion per year on advertising and public relations to sway and hold public opinion on everything from waffles

to candidates for governors. Communications is critical for those who want power or to those who want to retain it.

In preinvasion Iraq Hussein controlled information, and Iraqis followed along because they had little outside information, but many more followed Hussein because they knew challenging the dictator meant dire consequences. Iraq controlled its herd by force. In the United States many Americans were manipulated to support the invasion of Iraq when they heard arguments for preemption based on a faulty connection to weapons of mass destruction or to the 9/11 attacks. As the war in Iraq progressed during its first year, the herd back in the United States was fed a steady banquet of information by CPA spokesman Dan Senor and Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt of the U.S. Army through the usual troughs of information, CPA press briefings. But Iraqi masses were famished and suffered from an information drought. To worsen the situation, they were infected with a viral strain of chaos caused by the insurgency. Lippmann's bewildered-herd theory had manifested itself in Iraq. Chaos, not democracy, had come to Iraq once the postinvasion dust had settled.

Communications is the cornerstone of all human actions; without it, we do not understand each other's intentions, motivations, and actions. Generally speaking, educated people cannot derive conclusions without first processing information, digesting it, and then formulating ideologies based on their personal bias, genetic makeup, education, and socioeconomic standing. Humans are hardwired to lean toward certain concepts and opinions, a genetic predisposition, but well-presented information can help people process events as the brain sends it into mental processing, sort of like adding salt or pepper to an entrée.

Communicators in academe no longer argue about objectivity in journalism. Lippmann believed that reporters processed events subjectively and that fairness and accuracy in the story were by-products of the personal beliefs of a reporter. He was a man ahead of his time, as increasingly in this political environment audiences are seeing press institutions taking sides, Left or Right, or, in the case of international media, the side of nationalism, meaning the media cover stories with news angles that connect to their

audiences. This is nothing new but only now coming to light due mostly to the advent of communications technology and emerging media platforms.

Overseas, foreign media news angles often conflict with U.S. political and military agendas, and the conflict intensifies when news is compounded with graphic images or gory reports. “If it bleeds, it leads” is an old adage associated with the press. The more lurid the content, the more fascinating it is to consumers. There are many sociological and psychological reasons for this human obsession with death, and I’m certain part of it has to do with the fact that as mortals, it is captivating to be reminded of one’s own mortality, but news also has entertaining human elements, including conflict, hope, and resolution, but across the board humans internationally cannot help but watch violence because the tragic fact is that another human somewhere is no more because of it. Conflict is why we buy books, watch movies, and listen to music. Without it, what is there? As inhabitants of this planet, our predecessors fought elements, enemies, disease, and nature to survive. Conflict is hardwired into us all, and as much as we may not like that, it’s part of human nature.

The human drama can make public relations work harder or easier. In Iraq U.S. PAOs often joked about how hard it was to get positive stories in the press. They complained about trying to “sell” a war wrought with poor high-level administrative decisions. I joke about it, but the rudimentary mistake is that PAOs shouldn’t fancy themselves salesmen marketing a product or concept, but rather they should be conveyors of facts that are carefully determined during operational planning. PAOs should be vehicles for truths that are created as objectives of broader civil and military operations. How PAOs approach their duties impacts the media’s coverage of events. I too have joked about selling war, but the hard truth is that if PAOs fail to communicate effectively to a host-nation populace, people die and that is no laughing matter.

The insurgents with a small force of only about five thousand, according to U.S. military reports I read in 2004 shortly after I arrived in Baghdad, turned a nation of twenty-six million upside down. They used information on websites, notes left on front doors, flyers tacked onto street posts, pamphlets and newsletters, and broadcasts on Arab news channels to convey their objectives and beliefs. They followed up their statements with action.

They warned Iraqis not to help the coalition because the coalition's mission was unjust and unholy. Those who helped the coalition would be killed, and they backed this up by showing beheadings of coalition colluders. They warned towns not to allow coalition soldiers or Iraqi forces into their city's limits because doing so meant acceptance of coalition policies and would be viewed as cooperation. They supported their assertions by bombing a marketplace when instructions weren't followed. The insurgents communicated their beliefs and ideals and then showed they meant business by acting on their promises. They forcefully swayed Iraqi public opinion by denouncing the American system of Iraqi democracy, and they garnered Iraqi support through violence and fear, just as Hussein had done for decades.

The insurgency had gained a foothold in Iraq and forced support from Iraqis through aggressive intimidation and sometimes distortion of information, tactics that had worked well for Hussein. Iraqis increasingly began to allow insurgents to operate in their locales, fearing retaliation if they reported them because the coalition had disbanded Iraq's security forces and there was no internal defense or police force. But Iraqis also blindly followed the insurgents because there was no U.S. or Iraqi information provided to the Iraqi masses to counter what they were being told by the terrorists. The insurgents had their havens and a captive audience.

"Social reform is never popular in the victim country," social scientist Noam Chomsky wrote in *What Uncle Sam Really Wants* (1992). "You can't get many of the people living there excited about it, except a small group connected with U.S. businesses who are going to profit from it." Chomsky's words couldn't have been more apropos in Iraq. It was hard for Iraqis to get excited about their newfound democracy when violence and crime were rampant and living conditions had worsened throughout the nation since the U.S. arrival. The democratic experiment was failing not because of flawed ideals but because of flawed U.S. management. The only sources offering seemingly valid explanations to the Iraqi masses were the insurgents, and the Iraqis listened, maybe not believing what they were hearing, but they listened. The American government was too busy talking to the American media, and the Iraqi government was not talking to anyone.

I eventually got my number called as a reservist, and I was in the proverbial game. My assignment in Iraq was to support the U.S. exit strategy in Iraq by telling the world about the development of Iraqi security forces. Our unit was a multinational command composed of military advisers from the army, navy, air force, and marine corps from militaries all over the globe as well as civilian contractors and government officials from around the world. We were responsible for training, equipping, and mentoring Iraqi security forces. As the tip of the spear for U.S. foreign policy in Iraq, we had billions of dollars in our budget and priceless human capital.

Our mission was unique in that we weren't solely responsible for security and stability operations in Iraq like the bulk of the forces there. Our job was to prepare nascent Iraqi troops to someday provide security for their nation and defend it against attacks, including conducting intense counterinsurgency operations.

Days after arriving in Iraq in 2004, what I discovered was disheartening and discouraging, and it explained why the media's reportage had become what PAOs alleged to be "lopsided." Coalition PAOs weren't productive. CPA PAOs behaved as if they were at a frat party, and some were young, inexperienced civilians who treated reporters with contempt. They relied on a complex labyrinth of public affairs organizational charts to delay and confuse reporters on deadline. The military ranks weren't much better. People in key public affairs roles within the Green Zone weren't the very best the military had to offer, especially since President Bush had made Iraq such a highly visible priority in the U.S. War on Terror. Many military public affairs personnel had only one public affairs deployment under their belt, if any, and most didn't have wartime communications experience. Nobody knew how to conduct a communications campaign during an insurgency, including me. Fresh from the Cold War, PAOs were short on this kind of skill, and it seemed as if nobody had been paying attention to what had happened to the Soviets in Afghanistan or even to our own military in Vietnam. The Iraqi battlefield called for creativity, but what I found was a military entrenched in its conventional communications tactics, unwilling to leave its foxholes and try new strategies and take terrain from the bad guys.

For Green Zone PAOs evenings in Baghdad were a back-smacking good time. It seemed like there was a steady stream of incoming and outgoing PAOs, ticket punchers ensuring they got their war credentials so they could lock up careers and promotions. Those leaving the war zone were unjustifiably congratulated for “great work,” and many PAOs who were now in the eye of the storm ratcheted up the antimedia rhetoric, firmly in control of information, as they ran the communications operation into the ground. Accountability, plans, strategy, and urgency were absent. There was no proactive connection between the operational forces on the ground and the communicators. There was only the usual reactive posture known to PAOs.

Poolside at Hussein’s Republican Palace was the place to be seen for the CPA crowd. Meanwhile, infantrymen and combat support personnel turned riflemen were subjected to less than austere living conditions at forward operating bases throughout the country and performed nightmarish missions outside the wire that guaranteed someone in their unit would get hurt or killed. Those in the Green Zone lived a plush life, and the threat of mortar rounds and rockets kept life edgy under a romantic canopy of false bravado.

This is not to say that all public affairs personnel in Iraq were bad. There were a great many who did good work and tried to turn the tide. A few were bright thinkers. There were some who worked their tails off Stateside to support PAOs in Iraq too, and for the most part the majority of the enlisted personnel in the public affairs force braved the bullets, bombs, and chaos to capture the story of U.S. forces in Iraq. They did incredible work as they brought the war fighter’s point of view to the rest of the world. But overwhelmingly, the collective public affairs force involved in the early stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom was an exceptional failure, and the efforts of a stellar few were overshadowed by the actions of a clueless many. While some PAOs can argue that they were just following orders, that tone is set at the top, and to the notion that things have always been done a certain way, I say, “Bullshit!” Anyone in uniform who is a commissioned or noncommissioned officer has a responsibility to be accountable and to speak up when things are running aground. I believe most PAOs said nothing about how screwed up the communications campaign was in Iraq because they

believed they were doing nothing wrong; they were unwilling to analyze situations and examine problems thoroughly because they believed they were on a good path. Many thought they were doing things correctly, and when things went south the press was blamed. Rather than have deep professional introspection, or a careful examination of the stated mission and the environment, PAOs deflected the reality. I don't think many PAOs knew just how bad they were doing in Iraq. I use their actions as barometers. Emotionally, most PAOs running the communications war weren't connected to the real war in Iraq. It was evident by the hours they kept, the circles they ran in, and the amount of time they spent in safety. They were too close to the process and to the flagpole, and they couldn't critically review their operations because doing so meant taking a hard look at themselves and what they were failing to do.

I deployed to Iraq not as a war fighter in the traditional sense, but instead with a loosely assembled communications plan in my head and plenty of strategic concepts in hopes that my so-called combat reach would be broader than just the range on my rifle. My contribution to protect U.S. forces, my impact on the war, I believed, would come from my ability to sway and hold Iraqi public opinion through a graceful and transparent engagement of the Arab press. The insurgency was rooted in Iraq because of U.S. forces' and the Iraqi Governing Council's inability to talk to the Arab world. Iraqis had been ignored for more than a year, as the insurgency took away Iraqi public support from the Americans. The U.S. and Iraqi governments never deemed it important to communicate with the Iraqi masses, and I believed I needed to get Iraqi officials talking to the Iraqi masses to help calm Lippmann's bewildered herd in Iraq.

Iraqis wondered what their government was doing behind the high walls of the Green Zone, and as many PAOs sat comfortably in their air-conditioned offices enjoying the benefits of a headquarters assignment, coalition soldiers on the mean streets of Iraq paid the price for a reactive, poorly planned, and bungled war information plan. As a result of failing to communicate with the Iraqi masses and the Arab world, the U.S. public affairs community is partly responsible for the deaths and injuries of those

casualties caused by the insurgency. The coalition should have fanned flames of Iraqi support, but instead it fueled an explosive insurgency by inaction and miscommunication.

I spent my entire tour in Iraq fighting my public affairs peers, their way of thinking, their adhesion to obsolete practices, their limitless patience for Iraqi bureaucracy, and their reactive posture. During my tour in Iraq we tried to paint a picture of what we saw. Like any other public relations professional, PAOs work to get information out to the public, and in Iraq that job included informing the Arab public as well as the American public, but most PAOs didn't see it that way.

Things were tough for me and my team, but our command was making strides and progress in training Iraqi forces and things were improving. That story reached many Iraqis and the Arab street during my tour as the chief PAO for the Multinational Security Transition Command Iraq (MNSTCI), and it reached many back at home and abroad. The insurgents took notice too and launched a violent campaign directly aimed at stopping our information flow to the Iraqi people. They attacked some of the Arab media contacts I worked with routinely and threatened my Iraqi public affairs counterparts. They even threatened me. It was a battle they would win in a war I am hopeful the United States won't lose.

Misdirected effort by the collective public affairs community in Iraq and Washington DC that includes the Coalition Provisional Authority, U.S. State Department, Defense Department and all its services, Iraq Reconstruction Management Office, Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, the multinational commands in Iraq, government contractors, and countless other agencies in the fray cost the military services of the coalition in human capital, the costliest of commodities; damaged the credibility of the nation in the region; and made the United States a spectacle in the Arab world.

While I may have faced frustrations and heartache in Iraq, my experiences and disappointments are minuscule when compared to what those under fire have survived. Their physical and emotional sacrifices can't be calculated. There is no scale to measure their devotion to duty or the cost of what they bear. My hope is that come what may in the publication of

this book, the military changes the way it conducts its communications business and that PAOs come to understand that they need to be assertive on the battlefield. They can change conditions on the ground for our military personnel and not just be a reactionary force waiting to respond to incidents on the battlefield. If this book ultimately saves some lives, then I've accomplished my objective, something I failed to do in Iraq.

It is with an extremely heavy heart that I wrote this book because the U.S. military has been a part of my life longer than many of my personal relationships, and in many ways it was a surrogate family for me when I was a young man. New to the ranks in 1982, I was reared by tough Vietnam War noncommissioned officers who showed me how to grow a thick skin, how to lead from the front and find the strength to say things that are unpopular. My dirty-boot time during the Cold War was spent as an enlisted military policeman walking fence lines overseas with a military working dog, three hundred rounds of ammunition on my belt with an assault rifle slung across my back. I deployed to the field, lived in foxholes for days and weeks at a time, and prepared for a Cold War showdown that never happened. When I traded in my sergeant stripes for my second lieutenant butter bars and became an officer, I spent a short time assigned to an infantry battalion as a platoon leader charged with leading combat medics. I was fortunate in that the first half of my career offered me a small glimpse of how thankless some military professions could be, and I carried that with me as I became a PAO.

This book is part memoir, part public relations handbook, part after-action review, part white paper, part catharsis, and a firsthand account of my yearlong mobilization to support Operation Iraqi Freedom as an Army public affairs officer and as the first chief of public affairs for Multinational Security Transition Command Iraq. It was written using materials from my tour in Iraq, including thousands of conversations, interviews, e-mails, and unclassified documents that I was exposed to during that time. It is also peppered with supportive research.

Here is some information to process, digest, and formulate an opinion on, a story with an ending not yet written, but written with the belief that the pen indeed is mightier than the sword.

SELLING WAR

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INSULATION

May 13, 2004: Attacks in Baghdad increased to 130 this week,
up from 81 the previous week.

—Office of Security Cooperation (OSC) unclassified intelligence report

My son walked next to me and held my hand as the creamy, sweet smell of jasmine drifted by us on a warm breeze. Occasionally, he glanced at me, mostly after thunder rumbled in the distance, well beyond the Spanish moss-covered oaks that canopied our neighborhood in central Florida.

“Don’t be scared,” I told him. “It’s just thunder.” But nonetheless we quickened our pace, his hand firmly clasped in mine, as the thunder roared again, closer this time, louder than before, shaking the ground beneath us. Then something I couldn’t see began to pull at my leg almost like a cramp, and I heard a voice that was definitely not the soft voice of my two-year-old boy.

“Steve, get up!”

I looked around, and it was still just me and Duncan standing underneath the tall oaks. The tugging on my leg continued, but when I looked down, nothing was there. Then an extraordinarily loud sound enveloped me. Boom! A young man suddenly appeared and hovered over me. He was agitated. For a second I didn’t know where I was or who he was, but as I rubbed my eyes I realized I was back in the shitty reality I had volunteered to join.

My roommate, John, a young Army Reserve lieutenant, was yelling at me. As I departed the clarity of my dream and entered the fog of war, his voice got clearer.

“Steve! Wake the fuck up, man!” John yelled. “Dude, get up! We’re getting hit!”

Our camp along the banks of the Tigris River in the Green Zone was getting pelted with rockets and mortar rounds, and he had been tugging on my leg, trying to wake me. The thunder I had heard in my dream was in reality explosions from insurgent rounds angrily closing in on our officer quarters.

I was exhausted, a uniformed zombie propped up each day by the hope of our mission and propelled by shots of espresso and dozens upon dozens of cups of coffee and chai tea. Once as I waited for a helicopter at a landing zone (LZ) at Camp Liberty, desperate for a pick-me-up in the energy-sapping three-digit heat, I emptied a pack of freeze-dried coffee into my mouth and added a few gulps of water that had warmed in my canteen after a daylong trip to eastern Iraq.

My team had been working an aggressive media campaign for three weeks, sleeping about four hours per night, if we were lucky, and I was skipping meals, thinking about taking up smoking again after eighteen years, not calling or writing home, and putting my nervous system through hell with a steady drip of caffeine that kept me moving. When I was at the office I was often ping-ponging off the walls. When we traveled my right leg twitched nervously, continuously, as if I were quickly stepping on a bass drum, keeping a steady beat of activity that was driving my dick into the dirt. That night the insurgents literally could have dropped a bomb on me and I would have slept through it.

John and I ran outside to watch the nearby British compound take a beating. The compound was just a few yards from our hooch, and the place had a pub and was one of a few mental-health havens within the Green Zone. Temperate British soldiers and overpaid American civilians enjoyed pints of ale and escaped the seemingly inescapable feeling of perpetual Groundhog Day syndrome common to those who spent their entire war tours under the long shadows of high concrete blast walls at the fortified Baghdad compound. A few of us congregated amid the camp's confusion, and we watched, stupefied, as the indirect enemy fire worked its way closer and closer to us. In between the mortar rounds, rockets exploded loudly around us, some closer than others. The rockets were being fired indiscriminately, and many simply whizzed overhead and impacted deeper

inside the Green Zone, but the mortars were being slowly and deliberately directed toward our camp.

A small crowd of U.S. officers, including three West Pointers who moved closer from the other side of the camp to get a better look at the incoming rounds, all watched the attack like spectators. This was new to me even though I was a career officer, and there was something captivating and mesmerizing about people trying to kill us. Given the decades of training I had received, I think I would have had more common sense and an overwhelming drive to flee for my life, but no shit there I was, out in the open, watching the attack, failing to take cover, and getting sprinkled with a light dusting of powdery sand that had been pulverized by the exploding rounds.

For many that night the attack would be the closest they'd ever get to the enemy. For hundreds of thousands of "fobbits," as we were affectionately dubbed by the guys operating outside compounds known as forward operating bases, it would be the only way many remembered they were actually in a war. We were all morbidly fascinated by the attack. We had that luxury, unlike the soldiers who patrolled the streets of Iraq "moving to contact," militaryspeak for soldiers looking to brawl with the bad guys. They used themselves to draw the enemy out of hiding.

While there was a chance of getting killed or wounded by a random mortar round, rocket, or occasional suicide bomber in the Green Zone, most informed, professional, and pragmatic soldiers knew that the real threat was beyond the reinforced walls of the compound, and improvised explosive devices, known as "IEDs," were the leading killer of U.S. soldiers in Iraq.

There was a threat inside the Green Zone, and during my time in Baghdad several people died from lucky-shot mortar rounds, rockets, and even suicide bombers inside its walls, but given the fact that it had been raining mortars on us nearly every day for a month and only a couple of people had been killed, the real threat was outside the Green Zone's walls. Statistics showed the danger was elsewhere, and I suppose those figures gave us a false sense of security that night, but I think for most of us it was fascinating to be on the working end of a weapons platform. That changed when a round landed several yards from us.

“Get the fuck down!” John yelled as a round came screaming at us. We all hugged the ground as the round exploded, and a dusty cloud tinged with a burned gunpowder-like odor enveloped us. Another round came screaming in, and we finally did what we should have done minutes earlier: we ran for cover. An enemy spotter, it seemed, had our position locked.

I don't remember breathing, and my feet were heavy as if they were buried in wet sand. I couldn't move fast enough, although I knew mentally all pistons were firing and telling my body to run faster. As I ran away from the corner of the camp's perimeter, the rounds seemed to follow us. I was lost as I made my way, weaving in and out of the warren of trailers, trying to find someplace to put some concrete between me and the sky. The incoming shrieking rounds propelled me. I felt if I could outrun the sound, I would be okay. I looked around as I sprinted to find no one near me; everyone had gone different directions. I have never felt so alone. It felt like I had gone the wrong way, as if there was a right way to run. As I moved I got my bearings, and I made a beeline to the only known hard edifice in the compound, a blown-out building one hundred meters from our trailer. It seemed as if it was twenty miles away. In the distance the rounds menacingly kept announcing their departure with a sound familiar to magic acts. Foom! Then almost magically, the rounds would explode in our camp. Off in the distance the CPA's loudspeakers warned, “Take cover! Take cover!” although the rounds had now been falling for several minutes.

It was the early summer of 2004, and there were no bunkers to protect coalition personnel from enemy mortar rounds and rockets. We had air-conditioning and running water in our quarters, but no bunkers to protect us from indirect fire. At least we'd die cool and clean, we always joked, but the fact that we had creature comforts instead of personnel protection measures was an indicator of how mismanaged U.S. priorities were in Baghdad. The camps were basically trailer parks. Each trailer, if you were not a general officer or high-ranking civilian or if you didn't have connections, was shared by at least four personnel. The trailers were divided in half by a common bathroom; two people occupied each side of the trailer, and four people used one bathroom.

Living conditions were good, and we had electrical power and heated potable tap water most of the time, although I do remember taking one shower that coated me with a slimy film and made me stink of fuel. My guess is that a contractor likely hungover from the previous night's partying at Saddam's pool mistakenly filled a fuel tanker with water, or vice versa, and dispensed the tainted water into the potable-water reservoir camp residents used for personal hygiene. I figured the fuel-enriched water would kill any Iraqi critters that had set up their own camps on my body, so that day I simply stayed away from smokers. In hindsight I think I lucked out. Somewhere, I thought, there was a convoy in Iraq with sputtering engines caused by water in their fuel systems, something that likely pissed off a group of soldiers who got attacked due to the slow speed of their convoy. I happily smelled like a gas station attendant for a day.

Home life in Baghdad wasn't tough at all. We had new furniture and beds, including televisions with DVD players. Toward the end of my tour we were even given satellite television connections. Things were certainly much worse elsewhere in Iraq, and the steady nightly flow of medevac helicopters mercifully ferrying wounded troops into the Green Zone's military hospital was proof of that. As they came in over the river on their flight path, sometimes their prop wash would churn up dust and vibrate our tin living quarters and remind me just how much worse it could be for me. Even if we didn't have bunkers and sandbags, I wasn't going to bitch. I could be sleeping and shitting in a hole somewhere, or, worse, I could be sent home in a body bag to fill one.

Our camps were comfortable but impractical and evidence that the U.S. government was catering to civilians who shared battle space with military folks. Somewhere along the way someone had forgotten that we were in a war zone. As civilian personnel flooded Iraq, camps in the Green Zone were built to house them. But the trailers provided as living quarters and as offices were nothing more than aluminum sheds. Having spent time in the field in military tents, I loved the sheds. They kept heat and cool in as needed and were comfortable, but they didn't keep anything else out. In fact, once as my interpreter sat at his desk working on his computer, an

AK-47 machine-gun round came slamming through the roof and bounced off his desk, ricocheted off of some lockers and the floor, and bounced into his hands.

“It is Allah’s will I didn’t die today, Captain,” he said happily.

“No, you’re simply a lucky motherfucker,” I told him. I’ve since heard that story told many times by Iraq war veterans. I guess I was successful in telling at least one story in Iraq or there were many more lucky Iraqis who dodged a bullet.

Months after I arrived and after months of constant indirect fire attacks, someone, thankfully, finally found the wisdom to insulate our trailers with sandbags in 2004. Although I was thankful for the protection, I’m certain the sandbags could have gone somewhere else where insurgent activity was much worse. The bags weren’t placed on the rooftops because the tin sheds couldn’t support the weight of sandbags, but they did place them high around the walls, which was better than nothing. Later, thick concrete bunkers were placed around the camp so we could run into them should we come under fire. One was thankfully placed right outside our trailer not more than ten feet from my door, right near the spot where I was a spectator with the other dumbass officers. Attacks would become so regular that many soldiers would grab their laptops, music players, and handheld video games as they ran to the bunkers. They grabbed anything to help pass the time as we waited for the “all clear” from the loudspeakers under twenty-four inches of reinforced concrete. It was like waiting for a train or for the rain to stop. We were simply killing time while insurgents were trying to kill us, but most of us didn’t romanticize it. Attacks were inconvenient and annoying, but a part of life in Baghdad. While the attacks were frequent, they were ineffective, and the odds were great that a person could spend several years inside the sprawling Green Zone and never get hit or even near an attack. My odds that night were simply not the norm.

The night I was dreaming of my son, we had nothing but half-demolished concrete-block buildings to flee to and the moon’s warm glow to find our way there in the dead of night, but at least we knew where the mortar rounds were landing and logic dictated we’d run the opposite way. When I reached

the virtual safety of the building, another round launched across the Tigris River. Within seconds it screeched down almost atop us. I jumped into the building headlong through a jagged hole that used to hold a door. Iraqis had long since looted the windows, doors, and frames in the days following the invasion. The round exploded within a few meters of us.

I looked up from the smoky rubble, and there were two senior noncommissioned officers sitting calmly in the dark, smoking cigarettes. Early on in the attack as they evacuated their trailer and ran for cover, they had seen me and other staff officers, mouths agape as the mortar rounds rained down in the camp next door. They had watched us almost buy the farm. I wondered instantly why we had more rank. It seemed to me the Army had commissioned the wrong people.

“Hi, sir,” he said, smirking. “What the fuck were you guys doing out there, sir?” he asked sarcastically, the cigarette dangling from his toothy grin.

“Sightseeing,” I answered as I finally took a breath. I realized just how stupid my actions had been. I was disoriented from the fatigue, still asleep when John dragged me outside, and I guess I made myself vulnerable because I needed to see what had pulled me away from my family and brought me six thousand miles to Iraq. To this day I can’t definitively say why I stood there and watched the mortar rounds come in, but I can say with no hesitation that I was never again a spectator.

We huddled closely into the small space of the shattered building, and I thought about how good their cigarettes smelled and wondered when the attack would end and how many more attacks I would have to endure. I had been in Iraq a few weeks, and while I had heard car bombs, mortar rounds and rockets exploding, and small-arms fire in previous weeks echoing in the distance, this was the first time the war had gotten close to me.

At the time I was working in Saddam Hussein’s Republican Palace, an immensely disgusting display of wealth and opulence within the Green Zone, so I felt doubly safe and disconnected from harm inside of our marbled military headquarters. Because of this insulation I was still not yet used to the incoming fire, but in the coming months I would grow accustomed to it and eventually become numb to its sound as it angrily fell to the earth in

search of a target. It would become a part of daily life sometimes for weeks at a time, and we treated it like inclement weather. We would don our flak vests and helmets and go about our business as calmly as one opens an umbrella or puts on a coat. It was part of the elements in Baghdad. The attacks were more inconvenient than they were dangerous. Maybe that's what I convinced myself of as I walked passed coalition soldiers cannonballing into Hussein's pool as other soldiers who couldn't resist the palace chow hall's three hot meals per day bronzed their bellies on lounge chairs. It was almost as if there were an invisible bubble over Saddam's pool. Nobody there ever felt like they'd get killed, or maybe they just didn't give a shit.

The mortars that night stopped firing shortly after a U.S. Army Apache helicopter flew overhead and headed off toward the Baghdad skyline. A soldier, moments later, walked up with a smoldering piece of rocket he had found a few feet from us, and we all looked at it as if it were an ancient relic. We were fascinated by it and pushed and shoved each other like kids trying to see something at show-and-tell. I didn't feel like a professional soldier. I felt like an amateur, a moron, someone just making believe he was a soldier. We had heard the mortar rounds coming in, but in between the mortar volleys the enemy had also fired rockets at us that made no sound as they came to the earth until they exploded.

"Steve, you're bleeding," someone said, and flashlights began to click on and get passed around as people checked themselves and each other for wounds.

I borrowed a flashlight to illuminate my leg, and there were a few small trails of blood flowing down my knee to my shin. My leg was a little meaty, but it was nothing more than a few lesions. I've seen worse injuries on my kids' knees after they fall off their scooters and color our driveway with their blood and skin. I didn't need a medic, just a change of underwear, a children's chewable aspirin, and a stiff glass of bourbon.

I pressed my leg to see if I could feel anything underneath my skin, but the only thing I felt was my knobby knee. My leg was a little numb, and I had no sensation on my skin. The leg worked fine, but at that moment I decided I would take up smoking again while in Iraq, and the next day I bought a carton of Marlboros reds and became a closet smoker.

More than thirty minutes later we walked back to the trailer and collected some things. We simply couldn't sleep at the trailer that night. It was too risky. I cleaned up my knee with a first-aid kit and put some bandages on the wounds. As we walked to the palace, nearly forty-five minutes after the attack stopped, the loudspeaker in the distance echoed, "All clear! All clear!" into the warm night air. No shit, I thought.

John found a comfortable picnic table al fresco on one of the palace's patios and made himself at home for the night, and I slept inside the makeshift multid denominational U.S. chapel on an ornate couch for a couple of hours as people quietly entered the chapel throughout the night. One soldier entered and went to the front of the chapel to a table that was considered the pulpit, and he kneeled before it, bowed his head, and prayed. He had enough ammunition on him to sack a city, and by the look on his face when he turned around I could tell that wherever he was going, the ammunition wasn't enough to make him feel safe.

The next day as I and fellow fobbits talked about what happened that night, some of my fellow staff officers opined that I was likely hit by shrapnel from the rocket or by some other object that was sent flying by the exploding shell. An airborne infantry major who worked at our command watched me run for cover from the blown-out building where he had gone when the shelling began. As I ran toward him he said I ran right through the impact area and that he saw blood on me as I arrived at the building. He was convinced I had been hit. I don't remember details like where I was or where I ran, and if asked today to retrace those steps I could probably just offer the direction I ran. I do remember the loud explosions, percussions of the rounds, and a lot of dust. The T-shirt I had on during the attack had a giant dusty skid mark on the front of it from the collar to my belly. Another possibility is that I got my pulpy knee from hitting the rocky floor of the building when I dove into it. The only thing I know for sure is that I had some minor cuts, and for that I was thankful.

My knee had bubbled up about as big as a grapefruit, so I iced it, wrapped it, and ate plenty of painkillers. One of my teeth overnight had also started hurting, and I couldn't chew on one side of my mouth. The

major and another officer I worked next to insisted I should get examined by medical personnel. They were smart. It was better to be safe than sorry. I reluctantly went to the combat support hospital (known as a CaSH) to get examined. As I waited to be seen by the doctors, helicopters landed at the hospital's landing zone. Staffers hurriedly wheeled in soldiers on stretchers and whisked them into curtained rooms, where medical teams converged with machinery and tools in tow to try to salvage and fix broken soldiers.

The hallways were filled with walking wounded, some with visible injuries and others who might be there to get treated for food poisoning, the flu, or some other ailment. The CaSH was like any other hospital. It had sick and wounded of all varieties in it. I watched a soldier get wheeled in while several medical personnel walked quickly alongside his stretcher, talking fitfully at each other and reaching across the fallen warrior urgently, like hungry kids at a dinner table. Across from me a sergeant sat in a blood-soaked shirt with his buddy. A couple of seats down from me a soldier complained about having difficulty breathing, while others just sat there and stared at the wall across from them, avoiding eye contact.

An enlisted medic ran out from the curtained room and sprinted down the hall and out of view. Seconds later he returned with several others running with him, and they all disappeared behind the bustling curtained area.

"Fuck this," I whispered to myself. I walked out of the waiting area, down the long straight hallway, and out into the hot, scorching Baghdad sun. I had no business being there. I had all my limbs and organs. I felt like a big pussy sitting in that waiting area, especially as wounded warriors were being brought in on stretchers. I couldn't get out of there fast enough, and I felt an overwhelming sense of shame come over me.

Getting explosives lobbed at you was a part of life in the Green Zone, and living in a trailer so close to the Red Zone (we were about twenty yards from the edge of the Green Zone) had its downside for sure, but when I first arrived in Iraq I was placed in a transient tent as I awaited permanent quarters that was much worse. It was filled with about fifty musty men and air-conditioned, and it had plywood floors and electricity. Lights went out promptly at 10:00 p.m., but most of us were kept awake by the explosions

echoing in the Baghdad night or by the guys who watched black-market porn on their laptops.

Some of the guys, despite a ban on food in the tents, sloppily ate at their cots, and a couple of times I felt rats crawling on me in the middle of the night as they searched for food. These were some pretty ballsy rodents, and somebody got smart and attracted one of the many feral cats around the palace and turned him loose in the tent during daylight hours. The rats all but disappeared, but the gunfire and explosions didn't.

One night as I struggled to fall asleep, a guy burst into our tent yelling, "We're being attacked! They're coming at us from everywhere!" I was in my boxers and a T-shirt, and I jumped up; put on my boots, flak vest, and helmet; and loaded a magazine into my Beretta pistol. I ran outside into the darkness and ran for a corner of the property to a spot I had scouted out when I arrived in Baghdad. I was a new guy and had not yet realized that the Green Zone was probably safer than most U.S. cities, save for the mortar rounds and rockets.

I crouched behind a tree stump and looked around. My tent was the only one of three transient tents emptying gun-toting, flashlight-wielding morons into the hot, arid night. Men in their underwear ran around with no direction, while many of the civilians ran into the nearby palace, despite having weapons and ammunition they could use to defend themselves. Outside the night was alive with gunfire my music headset had muffled as I lay on my cot. In the sky tracer rounds gracefully danced against the smooth black canvas of the night. They were bright as they shot out from behind the shadowy skyline and burned out softly as they disappeared in the skies above Baghdad. In my underwear and boots, armed with a little pistol, I was ready to make my last stand. John Wayne had nothing on me.

A U.S. naval officer crept up alongside of me.

"You see that shit, sir?" I asked him. Baghdad looked like 1991 all over again when coalition forces bombed the city in what we in the military call Gulf War Part I. This time it was small-arms fire and not antiaircraft artillery illuminating the night.

"What the fuck are they doing?" he said softly.

What could they be shooting at in the sky? I thought to myself.

As we crouched defensively a guy walked out of the nearby showers. The open door of the shower trailer momentarily illuminated the dark grounds around us and cast a light on us and our position. He walked by us wrapped in a towel from the waist down, carrying his toiletry kit in one hand and a flashlight in the other, his toothbrush sticking out of his mouth.

“That’s celebratory gunfire,” he said as he walked by spitting, pointing to the light show in the distance with his flashlight. “Iraq’s soccer team beat Saudi Arabia,” he said, and he disappeared into a nearby tent.

The naval officer began to shout angrily. “Who said we were getting attacked?”

The darkness offered no answer, just the distant sound of rifle reports. Most from our tent had already realized it was a false alarm or a really good gag and had already gone back inside.

“It’s going to be a long six months if this keeps happening,” the officer said.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “But I’ve got to be here a year, so it’s going to be an extra-long time for me.”

“You poor bastard,” he said, chuckling. “You must be in the Army,” he said, smiling underneath a thick mustache. I nodded. “Shit, you should have joined the Navy,” he joked.

Ain’t that the fucking truth? I thought.

In the distance around the corner of the palace, the loudspeaker blared, “Take cover! Take cover!” as we went back inside our tent, and everyone on the grounds ignored the orders. Later as I lay in my cot thinking about the night’s comedic events, I could only think about my family and going home. Then in the darkness I heard the loudspeakers announce, “All clear! All clear!” and in the distance the celebration continued and the rifle reports were my lullaby.