

**GI SPECIAL 6J16:**

# **“Get Out Occupier!”**



AP Photo

**Iraqis March Against Proposed  
U.S.-Iraqi “Security” Pact:  
“Whoever Tells You That It Gives  
Us Sovereignty Is A Liar”  
“The Occupier Will Retain Its Bases”  
“I Am With Every Sunni, Shiite Or  
Christian Who Is Opposed To The  
Agreement ... And I Reject, Condemn  
And Renounce The Presence Of**

# Occupying Forces And Bases On Our Beloved Land”

[Thanks to Mark Shapiro, The Military Project, who sent this in.]

**“The agreement that is supposed to be signed between Iraq and the U.S. is more dangerous than the occupation,” Sheik Abdul-Sattar Abdul-Jabar told the congregation in Baghdad’s Abu Hanifa mosque, the most prestigious Sunni shrine in the capital.**

October 17, 2008 AP & October 18, 2008 BBC & Associated Press

Iraqi anti-Occupation political leader Muqtada al-Sadr on Saturday called on Iraq’s parliament to reject a U.S.-Iraqi security pact Iraqis rallied in Baghdad against the deal.

Protesters chanted slogans such as “Get out occupier!”.

Organizers insisted over 1 million people turned out for the demonstration,

The mass public show of opposition came as U.S. and Iraqi leaders face a Dec. 31 deadline to reach agreement on the deal, which would replace an expiring U.N. mandate authorizing the U.S.-led forces in Iraq.

“The Iraqi government has abandoned its duty before God and its people and referred the agreement to you knowing that ratifying it will stigmatize Iraq and its government for years to come,” he said, in the address also intended to reach lawmakers.

“I am with every Sunni, Shiite or Christian who is opposed to the agreement ... and I reject, condemn and renounce the presence of occupying forces and bases on our beloved land,” the message added.

“If they tell you that the agreement ends the presence of the occupation, let me tell you that the occupier will retain its bases. And whoever tells you that it gives us sovereignty is a liar,” al-Sadr said.

Security was tight as demonstrators marched from the main Shiite district of Sadr City to the more central Mustansiriyah Square. Giant Iraqi flags covered nearby buildings.

The three-hour gathering ended without trouble except for when several young demonstrators pelted army troops manning a checkpoint with rocks.

Several Sunni and Shiite clerics, who wield considerable influence in shaping public opinion, also spoke out during Friday prayer services against the draft, complaining that the Iraqi public knows little about the terms.

Sadr’s militant opposition to the US presence has strong grassroots support among many Iraqis - and this was a physical manifestation of that opposition.

The political movement led by anti-U.S. Occupation politician Muqtada al-Sadr, which also holds 30 parliament seats, has come out strongly against the agreement.

Several clerics, who wield considerable influence in shaping public opinion, spoke out Friday against the draft, complaining that the Iraqi public knows little about the terms.

**“The agreement that is supposed to be signed between Iraq and the U.S. is more dangerous than the occupation,” Sheik Abdul-Sattar Abdul-Jabar told the congregation in Baghdad’s Abu Hanifa mosque, the most prestigious Sunni shrine in the capital.**

**“It is illegal and the government should not sign it,” Abdul-Jabar said. “The government should get the approval of the Iraqi people through a popular referendum.”**

During a sermon Friday in Najaf, al-Sadr aide Sheik Assad al-Nasseri said the demonstration would demand “the occupier leave Iraq unconditionally.”

**MORE:**

**[Sometimes, Dreams Come True]  
“Unless The Agreement Is Ratified Or  
The United Nations Grants An  
Extension American Troops Would  
Have To Halt Operations”  
“They Would Not Be Able To Fly Air  
Support Missions Or Otherwise  
Participate In Any Way In Combat  
Operations”**

October 15, 2008 By ALISSA J. RUBIN and STEVEN LEE MYERS, New York Times  
[Excerpts]

Several of the more independent members of Parliament said that the Iraqi government’s intimation that there had been significant progress on the security agreement was overblown.

“In Parliament it will face a lot of opposition,” said Mahmoud Othman, an independent Kurdish lawmaker. “Some of the nationalists won’t like it and some other groups, too. They won’t oppose it as such, but they will say they don’t like this article or that article. Maybe it will pass, but it will take some time.”

**“The situation is very muddy right now and none of the neighboring countries are enthusiastic about it,” he added.**

**“Turkey is also not for it to be signed quickly.”**

American officials worry that time is running out to get the deal approved before the end of the year, when the United Nations resolution authorizing the American military presence will expire.

**American military and State Department officials warn that unless the agreement is ratified or the United Nations grants an extension — considered highly unlikely, given the need to persuade the Security Council to agree — American troops would have to halt operations.**

**Troops would be confined to bases; they would not be able to fly air support missions or otherwise participate in any way in combat operations, officials have said.**

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## **IRAQ WAR REPORTS**

### **Mississippi Soldier Killed In Baghdad**



U.S. Army Pfc. Christopher A. McCraw of Columbia, Miss., who died Oct. 14, 2008 in Baghdad when he encountered small arms fire while on patrol. McCraw was assigned

to the 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. (AP Photo/The McCraw Family, HO)

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## Iraq's PM Slaps Down Odierno The Odious Over Bribery Accusations



Odierno expressing his opinion of the troops as he enters Forward Operating Base Loyalty in south-east Baghdad Aug. 5, 2007. (AP Photo/Petr David Josek, File)

[Thanks to Mark Shapiro, The Military Project, who sent this in.]

10.17.08 By HAMZA HENDAWI, BAGHDAD (AP)

**Iraq's prime minister said in remarks aired Friday that the top U.S. commander in Iraq "risked his position" by alleging Iran was trying to bribe lawmakers to vote against the proposed security agreement with the United States.**

In an interview published Monday in the Washington Post, Gen. Ray Odierno, who took command of the U.S.-led coalition last month, said U.S. intelligence reports indicated Iran has tried to bribe Iraqi lawmakers to derail the agreement, which must be approved by parliament before the U.N. mandate expires at the end of the year.

"The American commander has risked his position when he spoke in this tone and has regrettably complicated relations," al-Maliki told visiting Kuwaiti journalists Thursday.

"How can he speak like this about a baseless allegation? What has been said is truly regrettable."

Odierno and U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker met Talabani on Friday and al-Ani, the presidential spokesman, said he understood that Odierno has offered an apology.

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## **WELCOME TO IRAQNAM: HAVE A NICE DAY**



A U.S. soldier in a U.S. helicopter flying over Samarra, 100 km (62 miles) north of Baghdad, October 17, 2008. REUTERS/Thaier al-Sudani

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## **AFGHANISTAN WAR REPORTS**

### **“Several” Occupation Troops Wounded By Resistance Attack On Heart Base Gate**

Oct 18, 2008 AFP

A car bomb exploded outside a base of the NATO-led military force in Afghanistan's western city of Herat, wounding several troops, the alliance said.

The car bomb exploded at the gates of a base which is run by Italian troops in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) with some Spanish soldiers also stationed there.

“We did have casualties - just wounded,” an ISAF media official at the force's headquarters in Kabul said.

There were several wounded, she said, without being able to give more details. ISAF does not release the nationalities of its casualties.

A reporter at the scene said the bomb appeared to have struck a military vehicle which had overturned.

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## **Two Bulgarian Soldiers Wounded By Rocket Attack On Kandahar Airport**

Sofia, Oct 17, 2008 (BBC Monitoring via COMTEX)

Corporal Stoycho Demirev and Sergeant Delcho Mitev serving in 4th Security Company of the Bulgarian troops in Afghanistan were injured on Friday in a rocket attack of Kandahar Airport, the Defence Ministry Press Centre said.

The incident occurred at 1933 hrs Bulgarian time. The lives of the two servicemen are not at risk. Demirev got a slight injury in the right arm, and Mitev - a fracture in his right leg. They received immediate medical attention and were sent to a Canadian hospital. The servicemen's families were informed about the incident.

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## **“Reports Of Many Soldiers Defecting To The Taliban” Afghan Ex-Province Mayor Becomes Resistance Leader**

10/17/08 RTTNews

In what could be disturbing news for the government of President Hamid Karzai, the former mayor of Afghanistan's Herat province is now the most powerful local Taliban commander, media reports said.

Speaking from one of his 20 mountain bases hidden deep inside rugged terrain that were also used to fight the Soviets in the 1980s, Ghulam Yahya Akbari said he will not negotiate with the Afghan government as long as foreign troops are on the country's soil.

The former mayor -- leading more than 60 well-armed Taliban fighters -- said he is not interested in peace talks, and said he would even turn his guns on Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, if he negotiated with the present Afghan government.

“People may wonder why we live up in the mountains. That's because we want to avoid civilian casualties and fight with guerrilla tactics,” he said.

Akbari's steely resolve to fight foreign forces came amid reports of many soldiers defecting to the Taliban, unhappy with the "un-Islamic" ways of the foreign troops.

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# **“Cutting Off NATO’s Supply Line From Pakistan Is An Important Element In Our Strategy” “Some Military Bases In Southern Afghanistan Were Almost Running On Empty”**

[Thanks to Mark Shapiro, The Military Project, who sent this in.]

October 10 / 12, 2008, By SYED SALEEM SHAHZAD, CounterPunch [Excerpts]. Syed Saleem Shahzad is Pakistan bureau chief for Asia Times Online (Hong Kong).

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Since 2001, events in South Asia contributed to preparing the ground for the Taliban's 2008 spring offensive.

Unintentionally, diverse figures made their way to the Pakistan/Afghanistan border. Their strategy transformed a low intensity insurgency into an unparalleled war.

First came Maulana Ilyas Kashmiri, chief of Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami. A hero of the armed struggle in Kashmir, he spent two years in an Indian jail. He was arrested by the Pakistani security forces in January 2004 for suspected links to suicide bombers who rammed their vehicles into Musharraf's convoy on December 25 2003.

He was released after 30 days and cleared of all suspicion. But he was profoundly affected by the experience and abandoned his struggle for Kashmir's liberation. He moved to North Waziristan with his family. His switch from the Kashmiri struggle to the Afghan resistance was an authentic religious instruction to those in the camps in Kashmir to move to Afghanistan's armed struggle against Nato.

Abdul Jabbar, commander in chief of the banned organization Jaish-i-Muhammad, fighting the Indian troops in Indian Kashmir, was another who was arrested repeatedly after 9/11. Eventually he too settled in a training camp intending to fight in Afghanistan. Finally came the officers who had once been officially assigned by the Pakistan army to train Kashmiri militants in the late 1990s. A few resigned from the army and joined the militant camps in North Waziristan.



The new training camps quickly received support from foreign militants (particularly Chechens, Uzbeks and Turkmen) and local tribal warlords.

Study groups on ideological matters, moderated by ideologues such as Sheikh Essa, Abu Waleed Ansari and Abu Yahya al-Libbi, were formed.

From 2007, the Afghan theatre of war was controlled by the neo-Taliban.

Between 2006 and 2007 this new breed of well-trained but radical Taliban fighters rapidly spread across the tribal belt.

**North and South Waziristan were the traditional bastions of the militants but their numbers also soared (18,000 at the end of 2007) in tribal regions, such as Mohmand, where the Taliban had been relatively unknown until 2006.**

**In the adjacent tribal area of Bajaur they numbered more than 25,000.**

NATO commanders in Afghanistan appeared to have misjudged the neo-Taliban.

On January 14 the Taliban militants demonstrated their new abilities.

Militants belonging to the Haqqani network stormed the Senera Hotel in Kabul. Just as Kashmiri militants infiltrated the security system in Indian Kashmir before operations, Afghan militants dressed in police uniforms and acted in collusion with the local security officials. They also killed a few westerners. The same pattern was repeated throughout the year, particularly during the attempted attack on President Hamid Karzai on 27 April.

The audacious prison break in Kandahar in June, when the Taliban released more than 400 of their comrades, was another example of the Taliban's new training in urban guerrilla warfare, thanks to their Kashmiri teachers and former members of the Pakistani army.

But these were only secondary operations.

**The real strategy was applied elsewhere in the Afghan province of Nangarhar and the Pakistani tribal area of Khyber, which are part of the transit route for 80 per cent of NATO supplies.**

**In February, NATO convoys were targeted in well-organized attacks, so successful and effective that NATO was compelled to sign a deal with Russia on April 4 on land transit for non-military freight through Russian territory.**

**According to an anonymous senior member of the Taliban, "cutting off NATO's supply line from Pakistan is an important element in our strategy. If it is correctly implemented in 2008, NATO will have to leave Afghanistan in 2009, although we might need an extra year."**

**This strategy took the Taliban far from its traditional bases to the port city of Karachi and the supply lines connecting it with Kandahar and Kabul.**

On May 9 the Pakistani manager of the container fleet that takes oil supplies from Karachi to Kabul was kidnapped and his fate is still unknown.

**In August, about 30 Taliban members attacked a weapons convoy as it was leaving Karachi, which proves the quality of the group's intelligence.**

A western security expert explained that some military bases in southern Afghanistan were almost running on empty and "stopping all movement and offensive operations because of fuel shortages".

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The US and NATO underestimated this strategy and the ideological and strategic alliances which had led to the emergence of the neo-Taliban.

In January 2007 US officials had demanded that Pakistan's leaders not only pursue the Taliban militarily but also destroy their logistics bases, including the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad where 7,000 men and women studied.

During visits to Pakistan (at least seven from January to June 2007), US government representatives insisted that Islamabad take steps to rally popular support for the war on terror and facilitate operations against the Taliban.

Under this new system, Pakistan's armed forces were finally able to conduct effective operations against the radical militants.

Within the framework of this new agreement, the US and the UK brokered a deal to reconcile Bhutto and Musharraf.

Similar arrangements were made with small nationalist parties such as the Awami National Party and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, as well as the religiously conservative Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam-Fazlur Rahman party.

**By June 2007 the stage was set for a major showdown against the Taliban. This political and military strategy aimed to thwart the offensive expected in spring 2008.**

**The first stage of the counter-attack was the assault on July 10, 2007 against the Red Mosque with heavy losses on both sides. It was supposed to be followed by a joint venture by Pakistani and US troops from a base in Peshawar against camps established in the tribal areas.**

A detailed plan of US coordination with the Pakistani security forces, published by the US media, anticipated sending about 100 US instructors to work with a group selected from the 85,000 members of the Pakistani paramilitary force who would be the vanguard of the offensive.

But after the assault on the Red Mosque, the militants quickly turned their weapons on Musharraf and concentrated their efforts on the Pakistani army. Between July 2007 and this January, waves of violence seriously affected social, political and economic life in the country.

The attack on Bhutto's motorcade in Karachi on 18 October 2007 was the first shot from the neo-Taliban against US designs. Bhutto narrowly escaped harm in an attack which killed more than 200 and injured 500. She was the only political leader to support the Red Mosque operation and publicly endorse Pakistan's support for the war on terror.

Her assassination, on the orders of the command in Waziristan, shattered US plans in Pakistan.

What followed is well known: the election was delayed and military operations against militants suspended. But the militants were following their plan. They now launched violent attacks. The result was chaos and the state lost control.

The conservative Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), led by former Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif, secured an unexpectedly high number of seats in parliament in the election on 18 February. It would be initially included in the government coalition. A week after the election General Mushtaq Beg was killed in a suicide attack on the garrison city of Rawalpindi.

**Having thwarted US plans for joint action with the Pakistani army, the neo-Taliban sought to play for time to finalize their spring offensive.**

They benefited from the participation of the Muslim League in government to start peace negotiations with the Pakistani security forces.

**NATO misjudged the significance of this tactic and interpreted it as the end of Taliban operations against its forces. It was therefore surprised by the offensive that began this May.**

For the first time the number of western soldiers killed in Afghanistan in May/June (70) exceeded the number in Iraq (52).

**IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE RESISTANCE  
END THE OCCUPATIONS**

**OCCUPATION ISN'T LIBERATION  
ALL TROOPS HOME NOW!**

**TROOP NEWS**

# **Coroner Says Commanders And Officials In The Ministry Of Defence Should Be Ashamed Over Death: Soldier “Had To Wait For Almost Four Hours To Be Extracted From The Minefield By An American Helicopter Fitted With A Winch”**

[Thanks to Mark Shapiro, Military Project, who sent this in.]

17 Oct 2008 By Thomas Harding, Defence Correspondent, Telegraph.co.uk [Excerpts]

Military commanders and officials in the Ministry of Defence should “hang their heads in shame” over a decorated soldier’s death that could have been prevented, a coroner has said.

Cpl Mark Wright, 27, died in Afghanistan after a string of failures caused by a lack of suitable equipment and funding for troops, Coroner Andrew Walker said at the conclusion of his inquest.

**The paratrooper was left seriously injured while stranded in a minefield in Helmand because British helicopters had not been equipped with winches to extract casualties from dangerous areas.**

Instead the troops had to wait for almost four hours to be extracted from the minefield by an American helicopter fitted with a winch.

Cpl Wright’s parents criticised the military authorities for a “serious systematic failure” to provide troops with the correct training and resources following their son’s death in Helmand in 2006.

The “exceptional soldier” of 3rd Bn The Parachute Regiment was awarded the George Cross for extraordinary heroism in coming to the rescue of comrades who had walked into a minefield that no one had told them existed.

**But the rescue operation turned into a tragedy as soldiers stood on mines and then a RAF Chinook helicopter’s down draft detonated the device that fatally injured Cpl Wright.**

Six soldiers were injured and Cpl Wright’s “preventable” death happened in the back of a helicopter on the way to hospital.

"That a brave soldier is lost in battle is always a matter of deep sadness but when that life is lost where it need not have been because of a lack of equipment and assets those responsible should hang their heads in shame," Mr Walker told the inquest in Oxford.

He then listed eight major failures in equipment and training that all contributed to the soldier's death and criticised Britain's "lamentable failure" to pay for suitable helicopters.

Outside the court the paratrooper's father Bobby Wright, said he wanted lessons to be learnt from the tragedy so that families "would not suffer the same loss."

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## **FORWARD OBSERVATIONS**

**At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. Oh had I the ability, and could reach the nation's ear, I would, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. Frederick Douglas, 1852**

**"What country can preserve its liberties if its rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms."  
Thomas Jefferson to William Stephens Smith, 1787.**

**"The mighty are only mighty because we are on our knees. Let us rise!"  
-- Camille Desmoulins**

**"When someone says my son died fighting for his country, I say, "No, the suicide bomber who killed my son died fighting for his country."  
-- Father of American Soldier Chase Beattie, KIA in Iraq**

**One day while I was in a bunker in Vietnam, a sniper round went over my head. The person who fired that weapon was not a terrorist, a rebel, an extremist, or a so-called insurgent. The Vietnamese individual who tried to kill me was a citizen of Vietnam, who did not want me in his country. This truth escapes millions.**

**Mike Hastie  
U.S. Army Medic  
Vietnam 1970-71  
December 13, 2004**

**“Talk Of Success Is Just Rhetoric”**  
**“U.S. Generals Not Only Said That**  
**They Can’t Withdraw Precipitously**  
**From Iraq--They’ve Said That They**  
**Can’t Withdraw At All From Iraq”**  
**“This Is Not Trivial. This Is A Serious**  
**Statement That The Troops Are Needed**  
**Militarily In Iraq”**

October 9, 2008 Michael Schwartz interviewed by Eric Ruder, Socialist Worker  
[Excerpts]

*DOES THIS mean that all the talk about U.S. success in Iraq--whether from George Bush or John McCain or Barack Obama--is just a fiction for public consumption?*

I THINK that talk of success is just rhetoric--just fluff.

And the proof of that is very simply found in the fact that the U.S. generals not only said that they can’t withdraw precipitously from Iraq--they’ve said that they can’t withdraw at all from Iraq.

They’ve said this in the face of generals in Afghanistan saying the U.S. desperately needs more troops, and there are none from the U.S. to send, and so they have to rely on transfers of troops from Iraq to Afghanistan.

Yet the American commanders in Iraq are saying they can’t spare the troops.

This is not trivial.

This is a serious statement that the troops are needed militarily in Iraq.

The reason is twofold, I think.

**For all the talk about the success of the surge, there is still a very large war in Iraq, and that war cannot be carried on by the Iraqi military alone.**

**There are many military forces in Iraq capable of defeating the Iraqi military.**

The Iraqi military has no logistics, no artillery and no air force--all that is supplied by the Americans. They remain under-resourced infantry units for the American military, relying on the Americans for support, which is why U.S. troops are needed.

Two, the U.S. needs troops in Iraq in the event that the various forces within the country that are supposedly its allies need to be brought to heel.

The remobilization of the Sadrists, which could occur at any time because the Sadrists have not been disarmed or dissolved, could be another reason that U.S. troops are needed in large numbers.

The U.S. military is very aware of all this, and they feel that they need all these troops there.

If they remove troops, they think it might invite efforts to expel the U.S.

So they don't feel comfortable at all.

That's why they constantly use the word "fragile" to refer to the "success." From the point of view of the U.S. remaining in Iraq, the situation is deteriorating, and it has been deteriorating since the beginning of the surge.

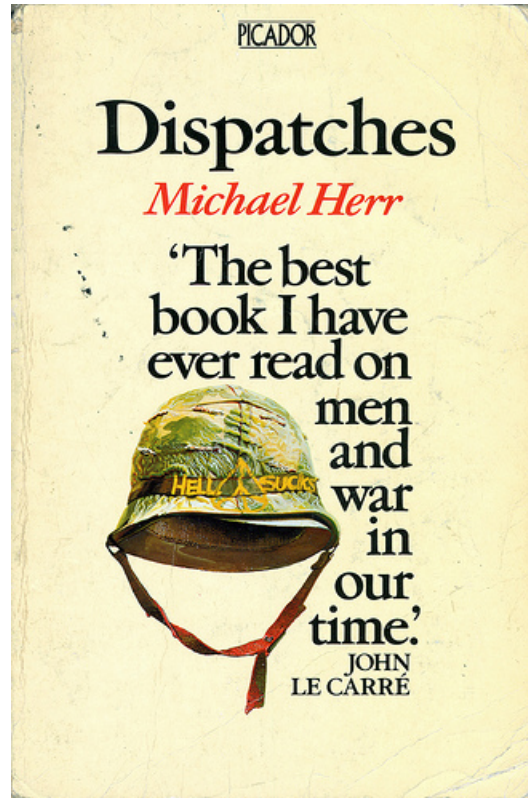
**Troops Invited:**

**Comments, arguments, articles, and letters from service men and women, and veterans, are especially welcome. Write to Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657 or send email [contact@militaryproject.org](mailto:contact@militaryproject.org): Name, I.D., withheld unless you request publication. Replies confidential. Same address to unsubscribe. Phone: 917.677.8057**

**If Iraq Is Not Another Vietnam,  
Why Do I Find Myself Rereading  
*Dispatches*?**

**“What They Understood And Their  
Leaders Refused To Acknowledge  
Was That Battles And ‘Victories’  
Didn’t Add Up To Anything. The  
Number Of Communist Dead Meant  
Nothing, Changed Nothing”**

**“There Is A Point Of View That Says That  
The United States Got Involved In The  
Vietnam War, Commitments And  
Interests Aside, Simply Because We  
Thought It Would Be Easy”**



[Farm4.static.flickr.com]

[Thanks to Mark Shapiro, Military Project, who sent this in.]

**While a colonel in Saigon was declaring that the enemy “no longer maintains in our view capability to mount, execute or sustain a serious offensive action,” out in the countryside soldiers were looking around uneasily, saying, “Charlie’s up to something. Slick, slick, that fucker’s so slick. Watch!”**

By Wendy Smith, The American Scholar

**Last fall, everyone I knew was talking about Vietnam.**

**Not that we hadn’t been talking about it before.**



**Ever since the invasion of Iraq, those of us old enough to remember had been unpleasantly struck by the parallels: blundering engagement in a country of whose history and culture our government was largely ignorant, a country unilaterally declared vital to our national interests by an administration that hustled Congress into supporting intervention based on falsehoods.**

**(Saddam Hussein's links to Al Qaeda not specious enough for you? Try Robert McNamara's characterization of a 1964 North Vietnamese attack on a U.S. destroyer secretly gathering intelligence in the Gulf of Tonkin as "unprovoked.")**

**By late 2006, as the disconnect grew ever wider between the Bush administration's assertions and what was actually going on, as "stay the course" began to sound a lot like "light at the end of the tunnel,"**

Vietnam loomed larger and larger.

Suddenly, I found myself rereading Dispatches.

Michael Herr's brilliant, bitter, and loving book was hailed as a masterpiece when it was published in 1977, and the critical consensus has held steady ever since.

Somehow, a young journalist whose previous experience consisted mostly of travel pieces and film criticism managed to transform himself into a wild new kind of war correspondent capable of comprehending a disturbing new kind of war.

"Herr is the only writer I've read who has written in the mad-pop-poetic/bureaucratically camouflaged language in which Vietnam has lived," wrote playwright and Vietnam draftee David Rabe.

It created enough of a sensation to prompt me to shell out \$8.95 for the hardcover, a lot of money for a college undergraduate in 1978. That was less than three years after North Vietnamese troops had marched into Saigon, during the odd political lull between Richard Nixon's resignation and Ronald Reagan's election.

I read Dispatches then through particularly rose-colored glasses, confident that we had learned the lessons of Vietnam and Watergate. In the ensuing 29 years, my awe at Herr's achievement has never lessened, but each of the three times I've re-read it, I've found new things.

The book hasn't changed, of course, but I have.

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ON FIRST READING, the images Dispatches implanted in my mind were unquestionably harrowing: the corpse-strewn streets of ruined Hue, Vietnam's imperial city; the spooky vistas of Khe Sanh, where the Marines endured near-perpetual fire from ghostly North Vietnamese divisions invisible in the jungle. But those blasted landscapes painted in swaggering rock 'n' roll brushstrokes were as remote from my own experiences as the implacable rituals of guilt and expiation in Greek drama — indeed, I naively thought the book offered overdue catharsis for the Vietnam tragedy and expressed a new national consensus about it.

**Herr's contempt for the authorities who had dumped American troops into combat, his matter-of-fact depiction of that combat as senseless, dehumanizing, and futile, seemed like givens.**

Didn't everyone feel that way by 1978?

My liberal, urban friends certainly did, and few voices anywhere were being raised in defense of a military and political strategy whose ultimate fruits (helicopters evacuating the last Marines from the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon while desperate, abandoned Vietnamese civilians swarmed the grounds below) were a painful recent memory.

**What impressed me most forcefully about Dispatches was the window it opened on the surreal texture of ordinary soldier's lives.**

**Liberated from deadlines by his freeform assignment from Esquire magazine, Herr spent much of his time hanging around with grunts like the exhausted kid who replied to the standard question, "How long you been in-country?" by half-lifting his head and saying, very slowly, "all fuckin' day," or the soldier detailed on reconnaissance patrol who told the reporter that the pills he took by the fistful "cooled things out just right" and that "he could see that old jungle at night like he was looking at it through a starlight scope."**

**Unlike his colleagues working for mainstream media, Herr was under no obligation to solicit and report the military command's unwaveringly optimistic statements; instead, he listened to "grungy men in the jungle who talked bloody murder and killed people all the time," men who despised sugar-coated official platitudes about what they were doing there as much as the most committed antiwar activist did.**

**Dispatches made it clear, I assumed, that hating the war didn't mean hating those stuck with fighting it.**

The virtually unanimous praise lavished on this searing text, the general conviction that it was a definitive portrait of the American experience in Vietnam, suggested that Vietnam was behind us now.

How young I was, and how much I missed.

I still didn't get it in 1982, when I stood weeping in front of Maya Lin's memorial lined with the names of Americans killed or missing in Vietnam from 1959 to 1975. Looking at the flowers and the handwritten notes placed along its black granite wall, testament to the anguish we still felt over the loss of so many lives, I couldn't understand the veterans who angrily viewed the unconventional memorial as a "black gash of shame," one more example of the way their service had been stigmatized.

**I didn't realize it then, but Vietnam was on its way to becoming the war we weren't allowed to win.**

**During the 1980s, I heard that revolting phrase uttered with increasing frequency by people who sought to erase our national trauma, not by acknowledging the mistaken analysis that entangled us in Vietnam and the stubbornness that kept us there, but by shoehorning it into a conventional saga of courage and sacrifice in an honorable cause betrayed by the weak and the disloyal.**

**Every scathing word in Dispatches belied this pat scenario.**

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WHEN I PICKED UP Herr's book again in the late '80s, however, I became uncomfortably aware that it also belied my blithe collegiate certainties. The first time through, I had breezed right over Herr's description of the questions people asked him upon his return as "political, square, innocent . . . I'd practically forgotten the language." I didn't even remember the troubling passage in which his pal Tim Page, solicited by a publisher to write a book that would "take the glamour out of war," erupted with glee: "The very idea! Ohhh, what a laugh! Take the bloody glamour out of bloody war!"

Herr and his fellow misfits among the press corps, dope-smoking longhairs though they might have been, not so secretly saw themselves as belonging to the time-honored, movienourished image of the swashbuckling war correspondent. They hailed helicopters like taxis, hitching rides into places like Dak To and the Ia Drang Valley, where they risked their lives to observe the nightmare reality buried underneath words like body count and pacification.

Then they grabbed the next chopper out, heading back to Saigon to print their photos and write it all down. There was glamour in war, and they got to experience the buzz of combat from a uniquely privileged position.

"Whatever else, I'd loved it there," Herr admitted.

Soldiers felt that way too, William Broyles Jr. acknowledged in "Why Men Love War," a 1984 essay in Esquire, which I read not long before I tackled Dispatches for the second time.

Broyles probed war's "great and seductive beauty," the enduring comradeship created among men who trusted each other with their lives, the knowledge that in battle you touched the fundamentals of human existence.

A Vietnam vet, he didn't scant the uglier aspects: the sense of power inherent in killing, the covert joy when someone else got wasted instead of you, the unpalatable fact that being surrounded by death was, in some weird ways, a turn-on.

His polished, articulate prose was light years removed from the pop-apocalyptic urgency with which Herr tried to capture the particular nature of Vietnam. And yet both conveyed a message I hadn't been able to hear in 1978.

For those who were there, the Vietnam War, like every war, was horrible and wonderful, the greatest experience of their lives as well as the worst thing that ever happened to them.

There was an important political discussion to be had about Vietnam, but there was another level on which politics was beside the point.

Dispatches was more than simply a great book about Vietnam, I began to understand.

I spend a lot of my professional time interviewing authors, and over the years I heard several of them refer to Herr's work with a reverence that bordered on awe.

Dispatches was "one of the greatest memoirs of all time," remarked Mary Karr, no slouch in that department herself. "It intimidated the pants off me," confessed novelist Bob Shacochis, who, when I talked with him, had recently completed a nonfiction portrait of American soldiers in Haiti. "I can't imagine writing a better book than Dispatches; it's a blast of genius."

The blasts of Herr's rage, scorn, and agonized tenderness have been disturbing my peace for nearly three decades now; few works in any genre have haunted me the way Dispatches has.

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IN 1999, IT REENTERED my life in the oddest way, forcing itself anew on my attention when I least expected it. I'd had a baby at age 39 and sank happily into the swamp of my son's all-consuming demands and my equally consuming love for him. The domestic world was my kingdom; war was one of those absurd male pastimes that had no relevance to me. (I know this is ridiculous: remember, I was a new mother.)

One day, reading a book about helicopters to my vehicle-obsessed four-year-old, I came across a photograph of a Huey landing under fire somewhere in South Vietnam. The next thing I knew, Dispatches was back in my hands.

It was placed there by my recollection of Herr's amazing description of the Vietnam chopper: "the sexiest thing going; saverdestroyer, provider-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jungle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder."

Rereading that fabulous effusion, I remembered Mary Karr's appreciative appraisal: "Just at the level of sentences, it's never boring." The third time around, I was swept away by the sheer magnificence of Herr's prose as much as by what he had to say. Of course, the two were inextricably connected, and Dispatches had something new to say to me in my 40s.

The book was a personal testament, I belatedly grasped.

Herr wasn't just showing me what the war did to other people; he was examining what it did to him. He was terrified, naturally — take a look at his defoliating depiction of being under fire:

That passage took me through Vietnam to the eternal terrain of stark, animal fear.

At its existential heart, *Dispatches* was about what happened to someone living for months on end with that kind of fear, about what the omnipresence of death did to your soul.

**Herr summed it up for himself in a single bleak sentence. Walking through the streets of Hue during the Tet Offensive, past hundreds of bodies decomposing in the cold rain, he wrote, "I realized that the only corpse I couldn't bear to look at would be the one whose face I would never have to see."**

The grunts' moments of individual reckoning were blunter. "All that's just a load, man," said one young soldier, dismissing the domino theory and other official rationales. "We're here to kill gooks. Period."

Being a mother, I flinched at the thought of my son growing up to say something like that. Being a journalist, I flinched again at Herr's sardonic addendum: "(That) wasn't at all true of me. I was there to watch."

I'd never covered a war or grilled a duplicitous politician, but anyone who writes nonfiction is familiar with the queasily mixed emotions inherent in using other people's experiences as your raw material. Herr dissected that complex, fraught relationship in a situation where the stakes were mortally high.

He thought of himself as the grunts' brother, sharing their miseries and dangers in the field. On the surface, they seemed to agree. They gave him their helmets and flak jackets, found him mattresses to sleep on, threw blankets over him when he was cold. "You're all right man," they said, "you got balls."

**But then would come "that bad, bad moment . . . the look that made you look away," or the comment of a rifleman watching a jeepload of correspondents drive off: "Those fucking guys, I hope they die."**

**Then the distance was clear.**

**"They weren't judging me, they weren't reproaching me, they didn't even mind me, not in any personal way," Herr wrote. "They only hated me, hated me the way you'd hate any hopeless fool who would put himself through this thing when he had choices."**

He was not their brother, and he came to a conclusion many reporters prefer not to draw: "You were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did."

**There was only one way to honor that responsibility, and the grunts told him what it was.**

**"They would ask you with an emotion whose intensity would shock you to please tell it, because they really did have the feeling that it wasn't being told for them, that they were going through all this and that somehow no one back in the World knew about it."**

**Herr told as many of their stories as he could cram into a narrative burning with his fierce belief that “conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it.”**

**He told the story of a freaked-out Marine, throwing away fatigues soaked with the blood of “some guy he didn’t even know (who) had been blown away right next to him, all over him.”**

**There was no way to wash them clean, the soldier said, near tears: “You could take and scrub them fatigues for a million years, and it would never happen.”**

**He told the story of a battalion in the midst of the Tet Offensive’s worst days, afflicted with despair so terrible that men from Graves Registration going through the personal effects of dead soldiers sometimes found letters from home “delivered days before and still unopened.”**

**All wars produce horror stories, but in most wars before Vietnam reporters were constrained from telling them, by censorship, of course, but also by their sense that there was a greater goal that at least partly justified the horrors.**

**Herr cared very little about the big picture — and who could blame him, when one month Khe Sanh fit into the big picture as “the Western Anchor of our Defense” and the next it was “a worthless piece of ground”?**

**He cared more about what he could learn from the Special Forces captain who said, “I went out and killed one VC and liberated a prisoner. Next day the major called me in and told me that I’d killed fourteen VC and liberated six prisoners. You want to see the medal?”**

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THE HUMAN TRUTHS of Dispatches were also political truths,

I could see when I angrily reopened it on the eve of the 2006 midterm elections.

Because Vietnam was an unpopular war that we lost, it was possible for Herr to say things about the essential nature of combat that it had been unacceptable to say about, for example, World War II. (The U.S. Army was so upset by John Huston’s Signal Corps documentary about veterans suffering from what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder that it suppressed the film for more than 30 years.)

Herr took full advantage of that freedom.

He took very seriously his commitment to tell the grunts’ stories, but he made no pretense of telling them from the grunts’ point of view, and he told stories they undoubtedly wished he’d kept to himself.

He wasn’t “embedded,” the cynical tactic invented by the Bush administration to enmesh reporters in a conflict they were supposed to be covering impartially. “I crossed the line from observer to participant,” said Time correspondent Michael Weiskopf, who lost his right hand when he picked up a live grenade tossed into the Humvee carrying him and

four soldiers on patrol in Baghdad. “It became very difficult to objectively assess the role of U.S. soldiers who were housing, feeding, befriending and protecting me. After three weeks in a platoon, I came dangerously close to adopting the mindset and mission of a soldier.”

Herr never fell into that trap.

His affection for the grunts didn’t prevent him from seeing what Vietnam had done to some of them. “They were killers,” he wrote of the soldiers hunkered down at Khe Sanh. “Of course they were; what would anyone expect them to be?”

With the appalling photographs from Abu Ghraib still vivid in my memory, I found my fourth journey through Dispatches halted time after time by grim glimpses of the atrocities committed in Vietnam.

Herr heard stories about “the man in the Highlands who was ‘building his own gook,’ parts were the least of his troubles”; about the door gunner, asked how he could shoot women and children, who replied, “It’s easy, you just don’t lead ‘em so much.”

He saw a photo of a Marine “pissing into the locked-open mouth of a decomposing North Vietnamese soldier”; albums with pictures of smiling soldiers holding up severed heads or necklaces of ears. “There were hundreds of those albums in Vietnam, thousands,” he noted wearily. The inevitable snapshot of a dead Viet Cong woman stripped naked was inevitably accompanied by “that same tired remark you heard every time . . . ‘No more boom-boom for that mamma-san.’”

Herr was sickened by what he saw and heard, but he didn’t judge the grunts. He knew what they were up against. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were not good guys; he observed without surprise that they were supplied by the Soviets and the Chinese, that they were responsible for plenty of atrocities themselves.

What unnerved American soldiers about their enemy — and drove the brass purely crazy — was that he wasn’t playing by their rules.

Over and over, Herr described major battles with massive casualties on both sides that didn’t so much end as stop when the North Vietnamese picked up most of their dead and vanished into the jungle.

**Command proclaimed them victories, but it was hard to feel victorious at the top of Dak To’s Hill 875, which hundreds of Americans had died to take, where there were exactly four Vietnamese bodies.**

**“Of course more died, hundreds more,” Herr wrote, “but the corpses kicked and counted and photographed and buried numbered four. . . . Spooky. Everything up there was spooky . . . you were there in a place where you didn’t belong.”**

**The grunts knew it, and they didn’t make their commanders’ mistake of underestimating their opponents.**

**While a colonel in Saigon was declaring that the enemy “no longer maintains in our view capability to mount, execute or sustain a serious offensive action,” out in**

**the countryside soldiers were looking around uneasily, saying, “Charlie’s up to something. Slick, slick, that fucker’s so slick. Watch!”**

**What they understood and their leaders refused to acknowledge was that battles and “victories” didn’t add up to anything.**

**“They killed a lot of Communists, but that was all they did,” Herr wrote of the campaign in the Vietnamese highlands.**

**“The number of Communist dead meant nothing, changed nothing.”**

Iraq is not Vietnam. The desert is not the jungle.

The Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army, infuriatingly hard to pin down though they were, were miracles of coherence compared to the rat’s nest of sectarian death squads and fundamentalist splinter groups accountable to who knows who that toss IEDs at American jeeps in the streets of Baghdad and Mosul.

What is shockingly, shamefully similar is the arrogance, criminal blindness, and willful obfuscation that ensnared America in both places.

**In 2006, no other sentence in Dispatches distressed me more than an almost casual aside in the midst of Herr’s exegesis of “the bloody, maddening uncanniness” of Vietnam’s terrain.**

**“There is a point of view,” he wrote, “that says that the United States got involved in the Vietnam War, commitments and interests aside, simply because we thought it would be easy.”**

Like all great books, Dispatches is inexhaustible.

I have learned from it, changed with it, made mistakes about it.

It was never the document of national reconciliation I once thought it was.

It was and is the timeless portrait of war’s bedrock realities — fear, death, murder, madness — that I was finally ready to confront in my 30s.

It’s also a revelation of the beauty that unfolds in extreme circumstances, the clarity of vision possible when everything extraneous has fallen away. It’s a brazen display of unbridled romanticism and extravagant prose.

It’s a chastening exploration of our complicity in what we see from a safe distance.

**It’s beyond politics, but we ignore, and have ignored, its political lessons at our peril.**

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| <p><b>DO YOU HAVE A FRIEND OR RELATIVE IN THE MILITARY?</b></p> |
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## DANGER: POLITICIANS AT WORK



**POLITICIANS CAN'T BE COUNTED ON TO HALT  
THE BLOODSHED**

**THE TROOPS HAVE THE POWER TO STOP THE  
WARS**

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