

oped NYRB 1

1

The White Man Unburdened

Excuse: lightning and thunder, shock and awe. Dust, ash, fog, fire, smoke, sand, blood, and a good deal of waste now moves to the wings. The stage, however, remains occupied. The question posed at curtain-rise has not been answered. Why did we go to war? If no real weapons of mass destruction are found, the question will keen in pitch.

Or, if more likely, ^{SOME} such weapons are uncovered in Iraq ~~not a tenth, not a hundredth of what we possess~~ but, yes, if such weapons are there, it is also likely that even more have been moved to new hiding places ~~beyond Iraq~~ ^{in other parts of Iraq} beyond the Iraqi border. (If that is so, then horrific events could ensue. Should they take place, we can count on a predictable response:

"Good, honest, innocent Americans died today because of evil Al-Queda terrorists." Yes, we will hear the President's voice speaking before he even utters such words. (For those of us who do not like George Bush, we may as well recognize that putting up with him in the Oval Office is like being married to a mate who always says exactly what you know in advance he or she is going to say, which helps to account for why more than half of America now appears to love him.)

The key question remains—why did we go to war? It is not yet answered. In the end, it is likely that a host of responses will produce a cognitive stew. The most painful single ingredient at the moment, is, of course, the discovery of the graves. We have relieved the world of a monster who killed untold numbers, mega-numbers, of innocent victims. Nowhere is any emphasis put upon the fact that most of the bodies were of

oped NYRB 1

2

the ^{of southern Iraq} Shiites who have been decimated repeatedly in the last twelve years for daring to rebel against Saddam in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War ^{we were the ones who} at a time when we encouraged them to revolt and then failed to help them. There may have been ^{what} a ^{an argument in} ^{believed} ~~first Bush administration which was won by those who believed~~ ^{recognition on our part} that a Shiite victory over Saddam could result in a host of Iraqi imams who might make common cause with the Iranian ayatollahs. ^{Shiites joining with Shiites} Today, from the point of view of the ^{remaining} ^{for us} Iraqi Shiites, it would be hard to prove to them that they were not the victims of a double-cross ^{so they may look upon} and those graves that we ^{for} now congratulate ourselves on having liberated ^{as voices} may be calling out from their tombs ^{from their tombs — asking} to request us to take a share of the blame.

Which, of course, we will not. We are too virtuous a nation ever to have done something so unworthy of our virtue.

^{Count on it} ~~Speak of a cognitive stew~~, we looked for many a justifiable reason to go to war with Iraq. They were a nuclear threat; they were teeming with weapons of mass destruction; they were working with Al-Queda; they had even been the dirty geniuses behind 9/11. The reasons offered to the American public proved skimpy, unverifiable, and void of the real politik of ^{for many a reason more even than Israel-Palestine} dealing with Israel-Palestine or of our need to get a chokehold on the Middle East. ~~for many a reason more even than Israel-Palestine.~~ We had to sell the war on false pretenses.

The intensity of the falsification ^{the full court press laid on the media} could best be seen as a reflection of the incredible damage 9/11 had brought to ^{American morale,} America morally, particularly the core of American morale, particularly the core of ~~the American morale~~.

the corporation. How many ~~men and women~~ ^{office} all over America, ~~all the~~ ^{plus all} organization people high and low, managers, division heads, secretaries, salesmen, accountants, ^{speculators,} ~~small~~ business people, all that ~~congeries~~ ^{office} of Americans who had relatives, friends or classmates who had worked in the Twin Towers—the shock travelled into the fundament of the

oped NYRB 1

3

And the American working classes identified with
 American psyche, ~~and the~~ warriors who were lost fighting that blaze, the firemen and the
 police, ^{all} ~~who were~~ instantly ennobled.

It was a political ⁶ monanza for Bush provided he could deliver an appropriate
 sense of revenge to ~~all those mid level whites who made up so many of the working and~~
~~professional class incinerated in the Twin Towers, and to the millions who he identified~~
~~those incinerated in the Twin Towers.~~
 directly with that inferno. When Osama bin Laden failed to be captured by the posses we
^{thrust back to}
 sent to Afghanistan, Bush was immersed again in the same ongoing domestic problems
 that did not give any immediate suggestion of being solution-friendly. The economy was
 sinking, the market was down, and some classic bastions of ~~the erstwhile~~ American faith
 (corporate integrity, the FBI, and the Catholic Church—to cite but three) had each
 suffered a separate and grievous loss of face. Increasing joblessness was an acid bath to ~~that~~
^{conceivably}
~~such~~ faith. Since our Administration was ^{probably} not ready to tackle any one of the
^{looming} serious problems before them, ~~it was natural to feel the impulse to move into larger~~
^{for the administration}
 ventures, thrusts into the empyrean—war! We could say we went to war because we very
 much needed a successful war as a species of psychic rejuvenation, and any major excuse
 would do—nuclear threat, terrorist nests, weapons of mass destruction—^{one could always}
~~let's just liberate~~
~~the Iraqis~~ ^{make the final claim that one}
^{was liberating the Iraqis, and who could}
^{argue with that?}

Be it said that the Administration knew something a good many of us did not—it
 knew that we had a very good, perhaps even an extraordinarily good, if essentially
 untested, group of armed forces, a skilled, disciplined, well-motivated military, career-
 focused and run by a field-rank and general staff who were intelligent, articulate, and
 considerably less corrupt than any other power cohort in America.

oped NYRB 1

4

In such a pass, how could the White House ^{Sail to} use them? They could ~~not only~~ prove quintessential morale-builders to ^{a core} ~~one~~ element of American life, ^{perhaps the core} ~~and then~~ ^{also serve} ~~group~~—those Americans who had been spiritually wounded by 9/11, ^{Close to them was} ~~that much larger analogous~~ ^{an even} ~~group~~, which had once ^{been} ~~come~~ near to fifty percent of the population, and ~~still~~ remained key to the President's political footing. And ^{average} ~~this~~ group had taken a real beating. As a matter of collective ego, the good ^{average} ~~white~~ American male had had very little to nourish his morale since the job market had gone bad, nothing, ^{in fact} unless he happened to be a member of the Armed Forces. There, it was certainly different. The Armed Forces had become the paradigmatic equal of a great young athlete looking to test his true size. Could it be that there was a bozo out in the boondocks who was made to order, and his name was Iraq? Iraq had a tough rep, but not much was left to him inside. ^{dream} ~~A choice~~ ^{opponent} A desert war with no caves in sight is designed for an air force whose state-of-the-art is comparable in perfection to a top-flight fashion model on a runway. Yes, we would liberate the Iraqis.

^{of which the US was the first} So we went ahead against all obstacles ~~Wantonly, shamelessly, proudly,~~ exuberantly, at least one half of our prodigiously divided America could hardly wait for the new war. We understood that our television was going to be terrific. And it was. Sanitized but terrific—which is, after all, exactly what network and good cable television are supposed to be.

There were ~~also~~ ^{other} ~~minor but significant~~ ^{factors} ~~reasons~~ (for using our military skills, ^{minor} ~~but significant~~ ^{reasons}) and these ~~factors~~ ^{reasons} return us to the ongoing malaise of the white American male. He had been taking a daily drubbing over the last thirty years. For better or worse, the women's movement has had its breakthrough successes and the old, easy white male ego had

oped NYRB 1

5

withered in the glare. Even the ~~minor but to many mighty~~ consolations of rooting for ^{his} ~~your~~ team on TV had been skewed. There was now measurably less reward in watching sports than there used to be, a clear and declarable loss. The great white stars of yesteryear were for the most part gone, gone in football, in basketball, in boxing, and half gone in baseball. Black genius now prevailed in all these sports (and the Hispanics were coming up fast; even the Asians were beginning to make their mark.) We white men were now left with half of tennis (at least its male half), and might also point to ice hockey, skiing, soccer, golf, (with the notable exception of the Tiger) as well as lacrosse, track, swimming, and the World-Wide Wrestling Federation—remnants and orts of a once great and glorious ^{white} centrality. Of course, there were sports fans who loved the athletes on their favorite teams without regard to race. Sometimes, they even liked black athletes the most. Such white men tended to be liberals. ^{They were no use to} Bush ~~never~~ ^{words cut off by} ~~the fax—you wrote too close to margin~~ immediate constituency. If he had a covert strength, it was his knowledge of ^{the} unspoken things that bothered American white men ^{the most}.

just those matters they were not always ready to admit to themselves. The first was that people ^{Can get over—} ~~hipped on sports are addicted to victory. It's not an accident that~~

Sports, the corporate ethic (advertising) and the American flag had become a triumvirate ^{go-for-the-win} that had developed all sorts of psychic connections with fortified by the military. War, after all, was, with all else, the most dramatic and serious ^(and the concept of victory has the noblest species of profit) extrapolation of sports) and in war, Bush knew, the good white American male still had ^{so Bush knew that a big victory in an easy war would work for the good white American male.} ~~the Armed Forces~~. If Blacks and Hispanics were numerous there, certainly representative ^{in union with patriotism,}

of their share of the population in the enlisted ranks, still they were not a majority, and ^{the}

^{Caution (as seen on the tube)} ~~the officer corps, (if the tube was a reliable witness)~~ suggested that the percentage of

white men increased as one rose in rank to field and general officers. Moreover, we had

oped NYRB 1

6

knock-out tank echelons, Super-Marines, and—one magical ace in the hole—the best air force that ever existed. If we could not find our machismo anywhere else, we could certainly ^{count} settle in on the interface between combat and technology. Let me then advance the offensive suggestion that this may have been one of the ^{covert but} real reasons we went looking for war. We knew we were likely to be good at it. ~~If that is a superficial reason, well, we are still dealing with a cognitive stew.~~

In the course, however, of all the quick events of the last ^{months} few weeks, our military ^{passed} went through a transmogrification. Indeed, it was one hellion of a morph. We went, ^{reluctantly} ~~reluctantly~~ ^{genuinely} ~~genuinely~~ ^{required to operate} from a potentially great athlete into a master surgeon capable of operating at high speed on an awfully sick patient full of frustration, outrage and violence. ^{in the last month,} Now, even as the patient is ^{getting} ~~being~~ stitched up, a new and troubling question arises: Have any fresh medicines been developed to deal with what seem to be teeming infections? Do we really know how to treat livid suppurations? Or would it be better to just keep trusting our great American luck, our faith in our divinely-protected can-do luck? We are, by custom, gung-ho. If these suppurations prove to be unmanageable, or just too time-consuming, may we not leave them behind? We could move on to the next venue. Syria, we might declare in our best John Wayne voice: You can run, but you can't hide. Saudi Arabia, you over-rated tank of blubber, ^{do} ~~are you out of gas?~~ Do you need us more than ever? And Iran, watch it, we have eyes for you. You could be ^a ~~our next~~ real meal. ^(we fight, we feed) ~~Because when we are fighting~~ ^{and go.} ~~good, we are ready to go, and go again. We must.~~ We have had a ^{real} ~~real~~ taste. Why, there's a basket-full of billions to be made in the Middle East just so long as we ^{stay} ~~stay~~ ahead of the trillions of ⁱⁿ ~~dollars~~ of debt that are coming after us back home.

oped NYRB 1

7

Be it said: the motives that lead to a nation's major historical acts can probably rise no higher than the spiritual understanding of its leadership. While George W. may not know as much as he believes he knows about the dispositions of God's blessing, he is driving us at high speed all the same—this man at the wheel whose most legitimate ~~boast~~ ~~if religious~~ boast might be that he knew how to parlay the part-ownership of a major-league baseball team into a gubernatorial win in Texas. And—shall we ever forget?—was catapulted, by legal ~~force~~ and finagling, into a now-tainted but still almighty hymn: All Hail to the Chief!

No, we will rise no higher than the spiritual understanding of our leadership. And, *once the order of victory cools, some will begin to see how* it is flawed. For ~~victim~~ *some of* once again of all those advertising sciences that depend on mendacity and manipulation. *some of* We have been gulled about the real reasons for this war, tweaked and poked by the best button-pushers around to believe that we won a noble and necessary contest when, in fact, the opponent was ~~gone as soon as it began~~ *looking for the can of worms* *a hollowed-out jelly*.

Perhaps Saddam made a decision to go underground with as much wealth as he had already spirited away, and would fund Al Queda or some extension of it in a collaboration of sorts with Osama bin Ladin—a new underground team, the *Incompatible* Terrorist Twins. That is an hypothesis as mad as the world we are beginning to live in.

Democracy, more than any other political system, depends on a modicum of honesty. Ultimately, it is *much* at the mercy of any *dishonest leader* *may* ~~vastly~~ powerful man who has never been embarrassed by himself. What is to be said of a ~~leader~~ *may* who spent two years in the Air Force of the National Guard (as a way of not having to go to Viet Nam) and proceeded—like many another spoiled and wealthy father's son—not to bother to show up for duty in his second year of service. Most of us have episodes *in* on our youth that can cause us

oped NYRB 1

8

shame on reflection. It is a mark of ^{maturity} character that we do not try to profit ~~later on~~ from
(but do our best ~~to~~ ^{learn from them.}) his declaration of
our early lacks and vices. Bush proceeded, however, to turn the end of the war into a ^{his own}
mighty fashion show ^{for himself}. How well he wore the uniform he had not honored,
^{war-garb}
~~while in service!~~ Jack Kennedy, a war hero, never put on a uniform while he was
Commander-in-Chief. ^{Not} Nor did General Eisenhower. They were the President's first
George W. Bush who might, if he had been entirely on his own, have made a world-class
male model for advertisers (since he never takes an awkward photograph) proceeded to
tote the helmet and sport the uniform, ^{and certainly looked like} one more great guy among the guys, no, you
^{Great}
cannot stop a man who has never been embarrassed by himself. Let us hope that our
democracy can survive these endless foulings of the nest.

oped NYRB 1

The White Man Unburdened

Excuse: lightning and thunder, shock and awe. Dust, ash, fog, fire, smoke, sand, blood, and a good deal of waste now moves to the wings. The stage, however, remains occupied. The question posed at curtain-rise has not been answered. Why did we go to war? If no real weapons of mass destruction are found, the question will keen in pitch.

Or, if more likely, such weapons are uncovered in Iraq—not a tenth, not a hundredth of what we possess—but, yes, if such weapons are there, it is also likely that even more have been moved to new hiding places beyond Iraq. If that is so, then horrific events could ensue. Should they take place, we can count on a predictable response: "Good, honest, innocent Americans died today because of evil Al-Queda terrorists." Yes, we will hear the President's voice speaking before he even utters such words. (For those of us who do not like George Bush, we may as well recognize that putting up with him in the Oval Office is like being married to a mate who always says exactly what you know in advance he or she is going to say, which helps to account for why more than half of America now appears to love him.)

The key question remains—why did we go to war? It is not yet answered. In the end, it is likely that a host of responses will produce a cognitive stew. The most painful single ingredient at the moment, is, of course, the discovery of the graves. We have relieved the world of a monster who killed untold numbers, mega-numbers, of innocent victims. Nowhere is any emphasis put upon the fact that most of the bodies were of



oped NYRB 1

2

Shiites who have been decimated repeatedly in the last twelve years for daring to rebel against Saddam in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War at a time when we encouraged them to revolt and then failed to help them. There may have been a tardy recognition on our part that a Shiite victory over Saddam could result in a host of Iraqi imams who might make common cause with the Iranian ayatollahs. Today, from the point of view of the Iraqi Shiites, it would be hard to prove to them that they were not the victims of a double-cross and those graves that we now congratulate ourselves on having liberated may be calling out from their tombs to request us to take a share of the blame. Which, of course, we will not. We are too virtuous a nation ever to have done something so unworthy of our virtue.

Speak of a cognitive stew, we looked for many a justifiable reason to go to war with Iraq. They were a nuclear threat; they were teeming with weapons of mass destruction; they were working with Al-Queda; they had even been the dirty geniuses behind 9/11. The reasons offered to the American public proved skimpy, unverifiable, and void of the realpolitik of dealing with Israel-Palestine or of our need to get a chokehold on the Middle East, no, we had to sell the war on false pretenses.

The intensity of the falsification, the full-court press laid on the media, could best be seen as a reflection of the incredible damage 9/11 had brought to America morally, ~~particularly the core of American morale~~, particularly the core of the American morale—the corporation. How many men and women all over America, all the organization people high and low, managers, division heads, secretaries, salesmen, accountants, small business people, all that congeries of Americans who had relatives, friends or classmates who had worked in the Twin Towers—the shock travelled into the fundament of the

oped NYRB 1

3

American psyche, and the warriors who were lost fighting that blaze, the firemen and the police who were instantly ennobled.

It was a political ~~mon~~^{ly}onanza for Bush provided he could deliver an appropriate sense of revenge to all those mid-level whites who made up so many of the working and professional cadres incinerated in the Twin Towers, and to the millions who ~~he~~^{we} identified directly with that inferno. When Osama bin Laden failed to be captured by the posses we sent to Afghanistan, Bush was immersed again in the same ongoing domestic problems that did not give any immediate suggestion of being solution-friendly. The economy was sinking, the market was down, and some classic bastions of the erstwhile American faith (corporate integrity, the FBI, and the Catholic Church—to cite but three) had each suffered a separate and grievous loss of face. Increasing joblessness was an acid bath to such faith. Since our Administration was probably not ready to tackle any one of the serious problems before them, it was natural to feel the impulse to move into larger ventures, thrusts into the empyrean—war! We could say we went to war because we very much needed a successful war as a species of psychic rejuvenation, and any major excuse would do—nuclear threat, terrorist nests, weapons of mass destruction—let's just liberate the Iraqis.

Be it said that the Administration knew something a good many of us did not—it knew that we had a very good, perhaps even an extraordinarily good, if essentially untested, group of armed forces, a skilled, disciplined, well-motivated military, career-focused and run by a field-rank and general staff who were intelligent, articulate, and considerably less corrupt than any other power cohort in America.

oped NYRB 1

4

In such a pass, how could the White House not use them? They could not only prove quintessential morale-builders to one element of American life, perhaps the core group—those Americans who had been spiritually wounded by 9/11. Close to them was that much larger analogous group, which had once come near to fifty percent of the population, and still remained key to the President's political footing. And this group had taken a real beating. As a matter of collective ego, the good white American male had had very little to nourish his morale since the job market had gone bad, nothing unless he happened to be a member of the Armed Forces. There, it was certainly different. The Armed Forces had become the paradigmatic equal of a great young athlete looking to test his true size. Could it be that there was a bozo out in the boondocks who was made to order, and his name was Iraq? Iraq had a tough rep, but not much was left to him inside. A choice opponent. A desert war with no caves in sight is designed for an air force whose state-of-the-art is comparable in perfection to a top-flight fashion model on a runway. Yes, we would liberate the Iraqis.

So we went ahead against all obstacles. Wantonly, shamelessly, proudly, exuberantly, at least one half of our prodigiously divided America could hardly wait for the new war. We understood that our television was going to be terrific. And it was. Sanitized but terrific—which is, after all, exactly what network and good cable television are supposed to be.

There were also other minor but significant reasons for using our military skills, and these factors return us to the ongoing malaise of the white American male. He had been taking a daily drubbing over the last thirty years. For better or worse, the women's movement has had its breakthrough successes and the old, easy white male ego had

oped NYRB 1

5

withered in the glare. Even the minor but to many mighty consolations of rooting for your team on TV had been skewed. There was now measurably less reward in watching sports than there used to be, a clear and declarable loss. The great white stars of yesteryear were for the most part gone, gone in football, in basketball, in boxing, and half gone in baseball. Black genius now prevailed in all these sports (and the Hispanics were coming up fast; even the Asians were beginning to make their mark.) We white men were now left with half of tennis (at least its male half), and might also point to ice hockey, skiing, soccer, golf, (with the notable exception of the Tiger) as well as lacrosse, track, swimming, and the World-Wide Wrestling Federation—remnants and orts of a once great and glorious centrality. Of course, there were sports fans who loved the athletes on their favorite teams without regard to race. Sometimes, they even liked black athletes the most. Such white men tended to be liberals. Bush never [words cut off by the fax—you wrote too close to margin] immediate constituency. If he had a covert strength, it was his knowledge of unspoken things that bothered American white men—just those matters they were not always ready to admit to themselves. The first was that people hipped on sports are addicted to victory. It is not altogether an accident that sports, the corporate ethic (advertising) and the American flag had become a triumvirate fortified by the military. War, after all, was, with all else, the most dramatic and serious extrapolation of sports, and in war, Bush knew, the good white American male still had the Armed Forces. If Blacks and Hispanics were numerous there, certainly representative of their share of the population in the enlisted ranks, still they were not a majority, and the officer corps, (if the tube was a reliable witness), suggested that the percentage of white men increased as one rose in rank to field and general officers. Moreover, we had

oped NYRB I

6

knock-out tank echelons, Super-Marines, and—one magical ace in the hole—the best air force that ever existed. If we could not find our machismo anywhere else, we could certainly settle in on the interface between combat and technology. Let me then advance the offensive suggestion that this may have been one of the real reasons we went looking for war. We knew we were likely to be good at it. If that is a superficial reason, well, we are still dealing with a cognitive stew.

In the course, however, of all the quick events of the last few weeks, our military went through a transmogrification. Indeed, it was one hellion of a morph. We went from a potentially great athlete into a master surgeon capable of operating at high speed on an awfully sick patient full of frustration, outrage and violence. Now, even as the patient is being stitched up, a new and troubling question arises: Have any fresh medicines been developed to deal with what seem to be teeming infections? Do we really know how to treat livid suppurations? Or would it be better to just keep trusting our great American luck, our faith in our divinely-protected can-do luck? We are, by custom, gung-ho. If these suppurations prove to be unmanagable, or just too time-consuming, may we not leave them behind? We could move on to the next venue. Syria, we might declare in our best John Wayne voice: You can run, but you can't hide. Saudi Arabia, you over-rated tank of blubber, are you out of gas? Do you need us more than ever? And Iran, watch it, we have eyes for you. You could be our next real meal. Because when we are feeling this good, we are ready to go, and go again. We must. We have had a real taste. Why, there's a basket-full of billions to be made in the Middle East just so long as we stay ahead of the trillions of dollars of debt that are coming after us back home.

oped NYRB 1

7

Be it said: the motives that lead to a nation's major historical acts can probably rise no higher than the spiritual understanding of its leadership. While George W. may not know as much as he believes he knows about the dispositions of God's blessing, he is driving us at high speed all the same—this man at the wheel whose most legitimate boast if irreligious boast might be that he knew how to parlay the part-ownership of a major-league baseball team into a gubernatorial win in Texas. And—shall we ever forget—was catapulted, by legal force and finagling, into a now-tainted but still almighty hymn: All Hail to the Chief!

No, we will rise no higher than the spiritual understanding of our leadership. And it is flawed. For, victim once again of all those advertising sciences that depend on mendacity and manipulation, we have been gulled about the real reasons for this war, tweaked and poked by the best button-pushers around to believe that we won a noble and necessary contest when, in fact, the opponent was gone as soon as it began.

Perhaps Saddam made a decision to go underground with as much wealth as he had already spirited away, and would fund Al Queda or some extension of it in a collaboration of sorts with Osama bin Ladin—a new underground team, the Terrorist Twins. That is an hypothesis as mad as the world we are beginning to live in.

Democracy, more than any other political system, depends on a modicum of honesty. Ultimately, it is at the mercy of any vastly powerful man who has never been embarrassed by himself. What is to be said of a leader who spent two years in the Air Force of the National Guard (as a way of not having to go to Viet Nam) and proceeded—like many another spoiled and wealthy father's son—not to bother to show up for duty in his second year of service. Most of us have episodes on our youth that can cause us

oped NYRB 1

8

shame on reflection. It is a mark of character that we do not try to profit later on from our early lacks and vices. Bush proceeded, however, to turn the end of the war into a mighty fashion show for himself. How well he wore the uniform he had not honored while in service! Jack Kennedy, a war hero, never put on a uniform while he was Commander-in-Chief. Nor did General Eisenhower. They were the President first. George W. Bush who might, if he had been entirely on his own, have made a world-class male model for advertisers (since he never takes an awkward photograph) proceeded to tote the helmet and sport the uniform, one more great guy among the guys, no, you cannot stop a man who has never been embarrassed by himself. Let us hope that our democracy can survive these endless foulings of the nest.

oped NYRB 1

1

The White Man Unburdened

Excunt: lightning and thunder, shock and awe. Dust, ash, fog, fire, smoke, sand, blood, and a good deal of waste now moves to the wings. The stage, however, remains occupied. The question posed at curtain-rise has not been answered. Why did we go to war? If no real weapons of mass destruction are found, the question will keen in pitch.

Or, if more likely, such weapons are uncovered in Iraq—not a tenth, not a hundredth of what we possess—but, yes, if such weapons are there, it is also likely that even more have been moved to new hiding places beyond Iraq. If that is so, then horrific events could ensue. Should they take place, we can count on a predictable response: "Good, honest, innocent Americans died today because of evil Al-Queda terrorists." Yes, we will hear the President's voice speaking before he even utters such words. (For those of us who do not like George Bush, we may as well recognize that putting up with him in the Oval Office is like being married to a mate who always says exactly what you know in advance he or she is going to say, which helps to account for why more than half of America now appears to love him.)

The key question remains—why did we go to war? It is not yet answered. In the end, it is likely that a host of responses will produce a cognitive stew. The most painful single ingredient at the moment, is, of course, the discovery of the graves. We have relieved the world of a monster who killed untold numbers, mega-numbers, of innocent victims. Nowhere is any emphasis put upon the fact that most of the bodies were of

oped NYRB 1

2

Shiites who have been decimated repeatedly in the last twelve years for daring to rebel against Saddam in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War at a time when we encouraged them to revolt and then failed to help them. There may have been a tardy recognition on our part that a Shiite victory over Saddam could result in a host of Iraqi imams who might make common cause with the Iranian ayatollahs. Today, from the point of view of the Iraqi Shiites, it would be hard to prove to them that they were not the victims of a double-cross and those graves that we now congratulate ourselves on having liberated may be calling out from their tombs to request us to take a share of the blame. Which, of course, we will not. We are too virtuous a nation ever to have done something so unworthy of our virtue.

Speak of a cognitive stew, we looked for many a justifiable reason to go to war with Iraq. They were a nuclear threat; they were teeming with weapons of mass destruction; they were working with Al-Queda; they had even been the dirty geniuses behind 9/11. The reasons offered to the American public proved skimpy, unverifiable, and void of the realpolitik of dealing with Israel-Palestine or of our need to get a chokehold on the Middle East, no, we had to sell the war on false pretenses.

The intensity of the falsification, the full-court press laid on the media, could best be seen as a reflection of the incredible damage 9/11 had brought to America morally, ~~particularly the core of American morale~~, particularly the core of the American morale—the corporation. How many men and women all over America, all the organization people high and low, managers, division heads, secretaries, salesmen, accountants, small business people, all that congeries of Americans who had relatives, friends or classmates who had worked in the Twin Towers—the shock travelled into the fundament of the

oped NYRB 1

3

American psyche, and the warriors who were lost fighting that blaze, the firemen and the police who were instantly ennobled.

It was a political ~~mon~~onanza for Bush provided he could deliver an appropriate sense of revenge to all those mid-level whites who made up so many of the working and professional cadres incinerated in the Twin Towers, and to the millions who ~~he~~ identified directly with that inferno. When Osama bin Laden failed to be captured by the posses we sent to Afghanistan, Bush was immersed again in the same ongoing domestic problems that did not give any immediate suggestion of being solution-friendly. The economy was sinking, the market was down, and some classic bastions of the erstwhile American faith (corporate integrity, the FBI, and the Catholic Church—to cite but three) had each suffered a separate and grievous loss of face. Increasing joblessness was an acid bath to such faith. Since our Administration was probably not ready to tackle any one of the serious problems before them, it was natural to feel the impulse to move into larger ventures, thrusts into the empyrean—war! We could say we went to war because we very much needed a successful war as a species of psychic rejuvenation, and any major excuse would do—nuclear threat, terrorist nests, weapons of mass destruction—let's just liberate the Iraqis.

Be it said that the Administration knew something a good many of us did not—it knew that we had a very good, perhaps even an extraordinarily good, if essentially untested, group of armed forces, a skilled, disciplined, well-motivated military, career-focused and run by a field-rank and general staff who were intelligent, articulate, and considerably less corrupt than any other power cohort in America.

oped NYRB 1

4

In such a pass, how could the White House not use them? They could not only prove quintessential morale-builders to one element of American life, perhaps the core group—those Americans who had been spiritually wounded by 9/11. Close to them was that much larger analogous group, which had once come near to fifty percent of the population, and still remained key to the President's political footing. And this group had taken a real beating. As a matter of collective ego, the good white American male had had very little to nourish his morale since the job market had gone bad, nothing unless he happened to be a member of the Armed Forces. There, it was certainly different. The Armed Forces had become the paradigmatic equal of a great young athlete looking to test his true size. Could it be that there was a bozo out in the boondocks who was made to order, and his name was Iraq? Iraq had a tough rep, but not much was left to him inside. A choice opponent. A desert war with no caves in sight is designed for an air force whose state-of-the-art is comparable in perfection to a top-flight fashion model on a runway. Yes, we would liberate the Iraqis.

So we went ahead against all obstacles. Wantonly, shamelessly, proudly, exuberantly, at least one half of our prodigiously divided America could hardly wait for the new war. We understood that our television was going to be terrific. And it was. Sanitized but terrific—which is, after all, exactly what network and good cable television are supposed to be.

There were also other minor but significant reasons for using our military skills, and these factors return us to the ongoing malaise of the white American male. He had been taking a daily drubbing over the last thirty years. For better or worse, the women's movement has had its breakthrough successes and the old, easy white male ego had

oped NYRB 1

5

withered in the glare. Even the minor but to many mighty consolations of rooting for your team on TV had been skewed. There was now measurably less reward in watching sports than there used to be, a clear and declarable loss. The great white stars of yesteryear were for the most part gone, gone in football, in basketball, in boxing, and half gone in baseball. Black genius now prevailed in all these sports (and the Hispanics were coming up fast; even the Asians were beginning to make their mark.) We white men were now left with half of tennis (at least its male half), and might also point to ice hockey, skiing, soccer, golf, (with the notable exception of the Tiger) as well as lacrosse, track, swimming, and the World-Wide Wrestling Federation—remnants and orts of a once great and glorious centrality. Of course, there were sports fans who loved the athletes on their favorite teams without regard to race. Sometimes, they even liked black athletes the most. Such white men tended to be liberals. Bush never [words cut off by the fax—you wrote too close to margin] immediate constituency. If he had a covert strength, it was his knowledge of unspoken things that bothered American white men—just those matters they were not always ready to admit to themselves. The first was that people hipped on sports are addicted to victory. It is not altogether an accident that sports, the corporate ethic (advertising) and the American flag had become a triumvirate fortified by the military. War, after all, was, with all else, the most dramatic and serious extrapolation of sports, and in war, Bush knew, the good white American male still had the Armed Forces. If Blacks and Hispanics were numerous there, certainly representative of their share of the population in the enlisted ranks, still they were not a majority, and the officer corps, (if the tube was a reliable witness), suggested that the percentage of white men increased as one rose in rank to field and general officers. Moreover, we had

oped NYRB 1

6

knock-out tank echelons, Super-Marines, and—one magical ace in the hole—the best air force that ever existed. If we could not find our machismo anywhere else, we could certainly settle in on the interface between combat and technology. Let me then advance the offensive suggestion that this may have been one of the real reasons we went looking for war. We knew we were likely to be good at it. If that is a superficial reason, well, we are still dealing with a cognitive stew.

In the course, however, of all the quick events of the last few weeks, our military went through a transmogrification. Indeed, it was one hellion of a morph. We went from a potentially great athlete into a master surgeon capable of operating at high speed on an awfully sick patient full of frustration, outrage and violence. Now, even as the patient is being stitched up, a new and troubling question arises: Have any fresh medicines been developed to deal with what seem to be teeming infections? Do we really know how to treat livid suppurations? Or would it be better to just keep trusting our great American luck, our faith in our divinely-protected can-do luck? We are, by custom, gung-ho. If these suppurations prove to be unmanageable, or just too time-consuming, may we not leave them behind? We could move on to the next venue. Syria, we might declare in our best John Wayne voice: You can run, but you can't hide. Saudi Arabia, you over-rated tank of blubber, are you out of gas? Do you need us more than ever? And Iran, watch it, we have eyes for you. You could be our next real meal. Because when we are feeling this good, we are ready to go, and go again. We must. We have had a real taste. Why, there's a basket-full of billions to be made in the Middle East just so long as we stay ahead of the trillions of dollars of debt that are coming after us back home.

oped NYRB 1

7

Be it said: the motives that lead to a nation's major historical acts can probably rise no higher than the spiritual understanding of its leadership. While George W. may not know as much as he believes he knows about the dispositions of God's blessing, he is driving us at high speed all the same—this man at the wheel whose most legitimate boast if irreligious boast might be that he knew how to parlay the part-ownership of a major-league baseball team into a gubernatorial win in Texas. And—shall we ever forget—was catapulted, by legal force and finagling, into a now-tainted but still almighty hymn: All Hail to the Chief!

No, we will rise no higher than the spiritual understanding of our leadership. And it is flawed. For, victim once again of all those advertising sciences that depend on mendacity and manipulation, we have been gulled about the real reasons for this war, tweaked and poked by the best button-pushers around to believe that we won a noble and necessary contest when, in fact, the opponent was gone as soon as it began.

Perhaps Saddam made a decision to go underground with as much wealth as he had already spirited away, and would fund Al Queda or some extension of it in a collaboration of sorts with Osama bin Ladin—a new underground team, the Terrorist Twins. That is an hypothesis as mad as the world we are beginning to live in.

Democracy, more than any other political system, depends on a modicum of honesty. Ultimately, it is at the mercy of any vastly powerful man who has never been embarrassed by himself. What is to be said of a leader who spent two years in the Air Force of the National Guard (as a way of not having to go to Viet Nam) and proceeded—like many another spoiled and wealthy father's son—not to bother to show up for duty in his second year of service. Most of us have episodes on our youth that can cause us

oped NYRB 1

8

shame on reflection. It is a mark of character that we do not try to profit later on from our early lacks and vices. Bush proceeded, however, to turn the end of the war into a mighty fashion show for himself. How well he wore the uniform he had not honored while in service! Jack Kennedy, a war hero, never put on a uniform while he was Commander-in-Chief. Nor did General Eisenhower. They were the President first. George W. Bush who might, if he had been entirely on his own, have made a world-class male model for advertisers (since he never takes an awkward photograph) proceeded to tote the helmet and sport the uniform, one more great guy among the guys, no, you cannot stop a man who has never been embarrassed by himself. Let us hope that our democracy can survive these endless foulings of the nest.

The White Man Unburdened

Exeunt: lightning and thunder, shock and awe. Dust, ash, fog, fire, smoke, sand, blood, and a good deal of waste now moves to the wings. The stage, however, remains occupied. The question posed at curtain-rise has not been answered. Why did we go to war? If no real weapons of mass destruction are found, the question will keen in pitch.

Or, if more likely, such weapons are uncovered in Iraq—not a tenth, not a hundredth of what we possess—but, yes, if such weapons are there, it is also likely that even more have been moved to new hiding places beyond Iraq. If that is so, then horrific events could ensue. Should they take place, we can count on a predictable response:

"Good, honest, innocent Americans died today because of evil Al-Queda terrorists." Yes, we will hear the President's voice speaking before he even utters such words. (For those of us who do not like George Bush, we may as well recognize that putting up with him in the Oval Office is like being married to a mate who always says exactly what you know in advance he or she is going to say, which helps to account for why ^{more than} half of America

now appears to
(loves him.)

The key question remains—why did we go to war? It is not yet answered. In the end, it is likely that a host of responses will produce a cognitive stew, which does, at least, open the way to ~~forming one's own notion~~. We went to war, I could say, because we very much needed a war. The U.S. economy was sinking, the market was gloomy and down, and some classic bastions of the erstwhile American faith (corporate integrity, the

1A

Summary

1A

The most powerful single ingredient at the moment is, of course, the discovery of the ^{graves,} ~~prisoners~~. We ~~sub~~ have relieved the world of a monster who killed untold numbers ^(mega-numbers) of innocent victims. Nowhere is any emphasis put upon the fact that ^{badly} most of the ~~victims~~ were Shiite who have been decimated repeatedly in the ~~ind~~ last twelve years for daring to rebel against Saddam ^{in the immediate aftermath of} after the Gulf War ^{at the time} when we encouraged them ~~at first~~ to start a revolution in southern Iraq and then failed to help them. There may have been a tardy recognition on our part that a Shiite victory over Saddam could result in a host of Iraqi ayatollahs ^{many} who might make common cause with the Iranian ~~ayatollahs~~ ^{today, from} ~~ayatollahs~~. From the point of view of the Iraqi Shiite, it would be hard to prove to them that they were not the victims of a double-cross, and those graves that we now congratulate ourselves on having liberated may be called out from their tombs ^{to request} ~~ask~~ us to take a share of the blame. Which of course, we will not. We are too virtuous a nation ever to be ~~do~~ ^{can} ~~do~~ ^{virtue} something so unworthy.

I speak of a cognitive strategy, ~~was~~
~~justifiable~~ ~~reflected~~ for many a good justification
(1B) reason top down with Iraq. They were ~~convinced~~
a nuclear threat, ~~and~~ ~~they were~~ ~~convinced~~
with we have (mass) ~~des~~ ~~the~~ ~~air~~ ~~they~~ ~~come~~
~~looking~~ ~~a~~ ~~safe~~ working with al-Qaeda, they
had ~~been~~ ~~been~~ ~~the~~ ~~dirty~~ ~~gunners~~ ~~behind~~
behind 9/11. The reasons offered to the
American public proved ~~shaky~~ ~~unverified~~,
and ~~void~~ of the real-politik of ^{dealing with it} Israel-Palestine
or of our need to get a ~~clutch~~ ~~hold~~ on the
Middle East, no, we had to sell the war on
false pretenses.

The intensity of the falsification, the
full-court press laid on the media could
best be seen as a reflection of the incredible
damage 9/11 had brought to American
morale, particularly the ~~core~~ ~~of~~ ~~American~~ ~~men and women~~
morale — the corporation. How many ~~all~~
over America — all the organizing, the people,
high and low, managers, division heads,
secretaries, ~~business~~ ~~people~~, ~~all~~ ~~the~~ ~~business~~ ~~people~~, ~~all~~ ~~the~~ ~~business~~ ~~people~~,
who had ~~relative~~ ~~for~~ ~~terminator~~ who
had worked in the twin towers — the shock
traveled into the fundament of the American
people, and the warriors who were best
fighting that day, the firemen and the police
were instantly cancelled.

1C

It was a political bonanza for Bush provided he could deliver an appropriate sense of revenge to all those mid-level white ^{and professional} ~~who made up~~ so many of the working class ~~as~~ ^{incinerated} in the Twin Towers, and to the millions who identified directly with them. When Osama bin Laden failed to be captured ^{possibly} by the ~~forces~~ ^{posses} in ~~capturing~~ ^{captured} to Afghanistan, ~~Bush~~ ^{Bush} was immersed again in some ongoing domestic problems that did not ~~give any immediate~~ ^{offer any immediate} suggestion of being ~~solvable~~ ^{solvable}.

Solution -

^{frankly, the} Economy was sinking, the market was down, and some classic bastions of the erstwhile American faith (corporate integrity, ~~the~~ the

1C

P2

FBI, and the Catholic Church—to cite but three) had each suffered a separate and

Increasing joblessness was also a grievous loss of face. Since our Administration was probably not ready to solve any one

of the serious problems before them, it was natural to feel the impulse to move into larger

ventures, thrusts into the empyrean—war! *We could say we went to war because we were much needed ~~and~~*
a species of psychic recuperation, and
 Be it said that the Administration knew something a good many of us did not—it

knew that we had a very good, perhaps even an extraordinarily good, if essentially untested, group of armed forces, a skilled, disciplined, well-motivated military, career-focused and run by a field-rank and general staff who were intelligent, articulate, and considerably less corrupt than any other power ^{cohort} group in America.

In such a pass, how could the White House not use them? They could prove

quintessential ~~the~~ morale-builders to one key group in American life, perhaps the key group. Americans who had been spiritually wounded group. If once this aggregate came to fifty percent of the population, it was now down to ^{and still} was it now thirty percent? Still it remained key to the President's political ~~(And this group)~~ footing. And it had taken a real beating. As a matter of collective ego, the good white

American male had had very little to nourish his morale since the job market had gone bad, nothing unless he happened to be a member of the Armed Forces. There, it was certainly different. The Armed Forces had become the paradigmatic equal of a great young athlete looking to test his true size. Could it be that there was a bozo out in the boondocks who was made to order, and his name was Iraq? Iraq had a tough rep, but not much was left to him inside. A choice opponent. A desert war with no caves in sight is

designed for an air force whose state-of-the-art is comparable in perfection to a top-flight model on a runway. Yes, we would liberate the Iraqis, ~~the~~

~~Philanthropic was a vehicle was aimed to prove successful, and would also serve as a species of psycho-repair.~~

* — let's just liberate the Iraqis.

2
~~patristic~~
~~1871~~
id-beth to
one

such
faith.

major
exchange
would
do
nuclear
threats
terrorist
nests
weapons
of mass
destruction

not only

~~the~~ element of
lets to one key group in America

core group

addition
than
to ~~them~~ ^{them} was
that much
larger
analogous
group
which
had
once
come
near to
extinction

fashion

3

at least, the thesis of what is presented here is that not only did we need a successful war as a species of psychic reparation, but that so tragically chosen. Only good people on high would rush to claim that our excuse would do.

putative foe possessed a nuclear threat. Along the way, they presented Hussein as the

closer architect of 9/11. Then they declared he ran a nest of terrorists. None of that has

on close examination but it did not have to. We were ready to go to war anyway.

After 9/11, the absence of Osama bin Laden's body in Afghanistan or anywhere else,

Why not? Saddam is now the evil force back of the fall of the Twin Towers

would liberate the Indians. Wantonly, shamelessly, proudly, exuberantly, one half of our

prodigiously divided America could hardly wait for the new war. We understood that our

television was going to be terrific. And it was. Sanitized but terrific—which is, after all,

exactly what network and good cable television are supposed to be.

There were, however, ~~some~~ better reasons for using our military skills, but these

reasons return us to the ongoing malaise of the white American male. He has been taking

a daily drubbing over the last thirty years. For better or worse, the women's movement

had had its breakthrough successes and the old, easy white male ego had withered in the

glare. Even the mighty consolations of rooting for your team on TV had been skewed.

There was now less reward in watching sports than there used to be, a clear and

declearable loss. The great white stars of vesteryear were for the most part gone, gone in

Football, in basketball, in boxing, and half gone in baseball. Black genius now prevailed

in all these sports (and the Hispanics were coming up fast; even the Asians were

beginning to make their mark.) We white men were now left with half of tennis (at least

its male half), and might also point to ice hockey, skiing, soccer, golf (with the notable

exception of the Times, as well as *Leopards*, *trunk*, *unimpaired*, and the *XX-11* *XX-1*

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study population

continued from p 3

knowledge of unspeakable things that bothered American white men - just those ~~other~~ matters they were not always ready to admit to themselves. The first was the people hipped on ⁴

~~On the other hand, the good white American male still had the Armed Forces. If~~
~~Blacks and Hispanics were numerous there, still they were not a majority, and the officer~~ *certainly representative of their share of* ~~the~~

corps, (if the tube was a reliable witness), suggested that the percentage of white men increased as one rose in rank to the higher officers. Moreover, we had knock-out tank

echelons, Super-Marines, and—one magical ace in the hole—the best air force that ever existed. If we ~~cannot~~ ^{could not} find our machismo anywhere else, we ~~can~~ ^{could} certainly settle in on the

interface between combat and technology. Let me then advance the offensive suggestion that this may have been one of the ^{real} cardinal reasons we went looking for war. We knew

we were likely to be good at it. ~~If that is a superficial reason, well, we are still dealing with a cognitive flaw, and everything is a cognitive flaw.~~

In the course, however, of all the quick events of the last few weeks, our military

In the course, however, of all the quick events of the last few weeks, our military *transmutation*. went through a *metamorphosis*. Indeed, it was one hellion of a morph. We went from a

potentially great athlete into a master surgeon capable of operating at high speed on an awfully sick patient. Now, even as the patient is being stitched up, a new and troubling

question arises: Have any fresh medicines been developed to deal with what seem to be teeming infections? Do we really know how to treat livid suppurations? ~~we were not quite~~ prepared for? Or would it be better to ~~ignore the consequences?~~ ^{just keep} Mightn't we keep

trusting our great American luck, our faith in our divinely-protected can-do luck? We are, by custom, gung-ho. If these suppurations prove to be unmanageable, or just too time-consuming, may we not leave them behind? We could move on to the next venue.

Syria, we might declare in our best John Wayne voice: You can run, but you can't hide.

Saudi Arabia, you over-rated tank of blubber, are you out of gas? Do you need us more than ever? And Iran, watch it, we

have eyes for you. **You** could be our next real meal. Because when we are feeling this good, we are ready to go, and go again. We must. We have had a real taste. Why, there's

sponts are addicted to victory. It is not altogether an accident that sports, the corporate ethical advertisement of the American, they had become a truism in the hearts of the million. When, all of a sudden, it was with a will, the most characteristic and serious extraparticipation of sports, and in many the good.

the
population
in the
enlisted
ranks,

a basket-full of billions to be made in the Middle East just so long as we stay ahead of the
^{of dollars}
 trillions (that are coming after us) *back home*

Be it said: the motives that lead to a nation's major historical acts can probably
 rise no higher than the spiritual understanding of its leadership. While George W. may
 not know as much as he believes he knows about the dispositions of God's blessing, he is
 driving us at high speed all the same—this man at the wheel whose most ^{if irreligious} legitimate boast
 might be that he knew how to parlay the part-ownership of a major-league baseball team

and ~~finagling into~~ ^{into} a gubernatorial win in Texas. And—shall we ever forget—was catapulted, by legal force
~~and~~ ^{now} ~~into~~ ^{into} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~hymn~~ ^{hymn}:
 thereafter, into a mighty hymn: All Hail to the Chief!

No, we will rise no higher than the
 spiritual understanding of our leadership.
 And it is flawed. For ^{victim once again of} ~~him to~~ ^{to} all those
 advertising sciences ~~that~~ ^{that} depend on
 mendacity and manipulation, we have
 been gulled ~~on~~ ^{about} the real reasons reasons
~~for this war~~ ^{for this war} ~~pushed and pulled~~ ^{pushed and pulled}
~~twisted and~~ ^{twisted and} ~~best~~ ^{best} ~~hutton-pushers~~ ^{hutton-pushers} around to believe
 that we won a noble and necessary contest
 when in fact the opponent was gone as
 soon as it began.

Perhaps Saddam made a decision to go
 underground with as much wealth as he
~~could command~~ ^{could command} had already spirited away
 and would fund Al-Qaeda ~~and~~ ^{and} some
 extensions of it in a collaboration of sorts
 with Osama bin Laden, a new underground team
 — the Terrorist Twins. That is an hypothesis as
 mad as the world we are beginning to live in,

~~Black~~ of the ~~nest~~ nest. The
a and (nestlings

that can cause
resonance or
reflection

oped NYRB 1

J

The White Man Unburdened

Excuse: lightning and thunder, shock and awe. Dust, ash, fog, fire, smoke, sand, blood, and a good deal of waste now moves to the wings. The stage, however, remains occupied. The question posed at curtain-rise has not been answered. Why did we go to war? If no real weapons of mass destruction are found, the question will keen in pitch.

Or, if more likely, such weapons are uncovered in Iraq—not a tenth, not a hundredth of what we possess—but, yes, if such weapons are there, it is also likely that even more have been moved to new hiding places beyond Iraq. If that is so, then horrific events could ensue. Should they take place, we can count on a predictable response: "Good, honest, innocent Americans died today because of evil Al-Queda terrorists." Yes, we will hear the President's voice speaking before he even utters such words. (For those of us who do not like George Bush, we may as well recognize that putting up with him in the Oval Office is like being married to a mate who always says exactly what you know in advance he or she is going to say, which helps to account for why more than half of America now appears to love him.)

The key question remains—why did we go to war? It is not yet answered. In the end, it is likely that a host of responses will produce a cognitive stew. The most painful single ingredient at the moment, is, of course, the discovery of the graves. We have relieved the world of a monster who killed untold numbers, mega-numbers, of innocent victims. Nowhere is any emphasis put upon the fact that most of the bodies were of

oped NYRB 1

2

Shiites who have been decimated repeatedly in the last twelve years for daring to rebel against Saddam in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War at a time when we encouraged them to revolt and then failed to help them. There may have been a tardy recognition on our part that a Shiite victory over Saddam could result in a host of Iraqi imams who might make common cause with the Iranian ayatollahs. Today, from the point of view of the Iraqi Shiites, it would be hard to prove to them that they were not the victims of a double-cross and those graves that we now congratulate ourselves on having liberated may be calling out from their tombs to request us to take a share of the blame. Which, of course, we will not. We are too virtuous a nation ever to have done something so unworthy of our virtue.

Speak of a cognitive stew, we looked for many a justifiable reason to go to war with Iraq. They were a nuclear threat; they were teeming with weapons of mass destruction; they were working with Al-Queda; they had even been the dirty geniuses behind 9/11. The reasons offered to the American public proved skimpy, unverifiable, and void of the realpolitik of dealing with Israel-Palestine or of our need to get a chokehold on the Middle East, no, we had to sell the war on false pretenses.

The intensity of the falsification, the full-court press laid on the media, could best be seen as a reflection of the incredible damage 9/11 had brought to America morally, ~~particularly the core of American morale~~, particularly the core of the American morale—the corporation. How many men and women all over America, all the organization people high and low, managers, division heads, secretaries, salesmen, accountants, small business people, all that congeries of Americans who had relatives, friends or classmates who had worked in the Twin Towers—the shock travelled into the fundament of the

oped NYRB 1

3

American psyche, and the warriors who were lost fighting that blaze, the firemen and the police who were instantly ennobled.

It was a political ~~mon~~ ^gonanza for Bush provided he could deliver an appropriate sense of revenge to all those mid-level whites who made up so many of the working and professional cadres incinerated in the Twin Towers, and to the millions who ~~we~~ ^e identified directly with that inferno. When Osama bin Laden failed to be captured by the posses we sent to Afghanistan, Bush was immersed again in the same ongoing domestic problems that did not give any immediate suggestion of being solution-friendly. The economy was sinking, the market was down, and some classic bastions of the erstwhile American faith (corporate integrity, the FBI, and the Catholic Church—to cite but three) had each suffered a separate and grievous loss of face. Increasing joblessness was an acid bath to such faith. Since our Administration was probably not ready to tackle any one of the serious problems before them, it was natural to feel the impulse to move into larger ventures, thrusts into the empyrean—war! We could say we went to war because we very much needed a successful war as a species of psychic rejuvenation, and any major excuse would do—nuclear threat, terrorist nests, weapons of mass destruction—let's just liberate the Iraqis.

Be it said that the Administration knew something a good many of us did not—it knew that we had a very good, perhaps even an extraordinarily good, if essentially untested, group of armed forces, a skilled, disciplined, well-motivated military, career-focused and run by a field-rank and general staff who were intelligent, articulate, and considerably less corrupt than any other power cohort in America.

oped NYRB 1

4

In such a pass, how could the White House not use them? They could not only prove quintessential morale-builders to one element of American life, perhaps the core group—those Americans who had been spiritually wounded by 9/11. Close to them was that much larger analogous group, which had once come near to fifty percent of the population, and still remained key to the President's political footing. And this group had taken a real beating. As a matter of collective ego, the good white American male had had very little to nourish his morale since the job market had gone bad, nothing unless he happened to be a member of the Armed Forces. There, it was certainly different. The Armed Forces had become the paradigmatic equal of a great young athlete looking to test his true size. Could it be that there was a bozo out in the boondocks who was made to order, and his name was Iraq? Iraq had a tough rep, but not much was left to him inside. A choice opponent. A desert war with no caves in sight is designed for an air force whose state-of-the-art is comparable in perfection to a top-flight fashion model on a runway. Yes, we would liberate the Iraqis.

So we went ahead against all obstacles. Wantonly, shamelessly, proudly, exuberantly, at least one half of our prodigiously divided America could hardly wait for the new war. We understood that our television was going to be terrific. And it was. Sanitized but terrific—which is, after all, exactly what network and good cable television are supposed to be.

There were also other minor but significant reasons for using our military skills, and these factors return us to the ongoing malaise of the white American male. He had been taking a daily drubbing over the last thirty years. For better or worse, the women's movement has had its breakthrough successes and the old, easy white male ego had

oped NYRB 1

5

withered in the glare. Even the minor but to many mighty consolations of rooting for your team on TV had been skewed. There was now measurably less reward in watching sports than there used to be, a clear and declarable loss. The great white stars of yesteryear were for the most part gone, gone in football, in basketball, in boxing, and half gone in baseball. Black genius now prevailed in all these sports (and the Hispanics were coming up fast; even the Asians were beginning to make their mark.) We white men were now left with half of tennis (at least its male half), and might also point to ice hockey, skiing, soccer, golf, (with the notable exception of the Tiger) as well as lacrosse, track, swimming, and the World-Wide Wrestling Federation—remnants and orts of a once great and glorious centrality. Of course, there were sports fans who loved the athletes on their favorite teams without regard to race. Sometimes, they even liked black athletes the most. Such white men tended to be liberals. Bush never [words cut off by the fax—you wrote too close to margin] immediate constituency. If he had a covert strength, it was his knowledge of unspoken things that bothered American white men—just those matters they were not always ready to admit to themselves. The first was that people hipped on sports are addicted to victory. It is not altogether an accident that sports, the corporate ethic (advertising) and the American flag had become a triumvirate fortified by the military. War, after all, was, with all else, the most dramatic and serious extrapolation of sports, and in war, Bush knew, the good white American male still had the Armed Forces. If Blacks and Hispanics were numerous there, certainly representative of their share of the population in the enlisted ranks, still they were not a majority, and the officer corps, (if the tube was a reliable witness), suggested that the percentage of white men increased as one rose in rank to field and general officers. Moreover, we had

oped NYRB I

6

knock-out tank echelons, Super-Marines, and—one magical ace in the hole—the best air force that ever existed. If we could not find our machismo anywhere else, we could certainly settle in on the interface between combat and technology. Let me then advance the offensive suggestion that this may have been one of the real reasons we went looking for war. We knew we were likely to be good at it. If that is a superficial reason, well, we are still dealing with a cognitive stew.

In the course, however, of all the quick events of the last few weeks, our military went through a transmutation. Indeed, it was one hellion of a morph. We went from a potentially great athlete into a master surgeon capable of operating at high speed on an awfully sick patient full of frustration, outrage and violence. Now, even as the patient is being stitched up, a new and troubling question arises: Have any fresh medicines been developed to deal with what seem to be teeming infections? Do we really know how to treat livid suppurations? Or would it be better to just keep trusting our great American luck, our faith in our divinely-protected can-do luck? We are, by custom, gung-ho. If these suppurations prove to be unmanageable, or just too time-consuming, may we not leave them behind? We could move on to the next venue. Syria, we might declare in our best John Wayne voice: You can run, but you can't hide. Saudi Arabia, you over-rated tank of blubber, are you out of gas? Do you need us more than ever? And Iran, watch it, we have eyes for you. You could be our next real meal. Because when we are feeling this good, we are ready to go, and go again. We must. We have had a real taste. Why, there's a basket-full of billions to be made in the Middle East just so long as we stay ahead of the trillions of dollars of debt that are coming after us back home.

oped NYRB 1

7

Be it said: the motives that lead to a nation's major historical acts can probably rise no higher than the spiritual understanding of its leadership. While George W. may not know as much as he believes he knows about the dispositions of God's blessing, he is driving us at high speed all the same—this man at the wheel whose most legitimate boast if irreligious boast might be that he knew how to parlay the part-ownership of a major-league baseball team into a gubernatorial win in Texas. And—shall we ever forget—was catapulted, by legal force and finagling, into a now-tainted but still almighty hymn: All Hail to the Chief!

No, we will rise no higher than the spiritual understanding of our leadership. And it is flawed. For, victim once again of all those advertising sciences that depend on mendacity and manipulation, we have been gulled about the real reasons for this war, tweaked and poked by the best button-pushers around to believe that we won a noble and necessary contest when, in fact, the opponent was gone as soon as it began.

Perhaps Saddam made a decision to go underground with as much wealth as he had already spirited away, and would fund Al Queda or some extension of it in a collaboration of sorts with Osama bin Ladin—a new underground team, the Terrorist Twins. That is an hypothesis as mad as the world we are beginning to live in.

Democracy, more than any other political system, depends on a modicum of honesty. Ultimately, it is at the mercy of any vastly powerful man who has never been embarrassed by himself. What is to be said of a leader who spent two years in the Air Force of the National Guard (as a way of not having to go to Viet Nam) and proceeded—like many another spoiled and wealthy father's son—not to bother to show up for duty in his second year of service. Most of us have episodes on our youth that can cause us

oped NYRB I

8

shame on reflection. It is a mark of character that we do not try to profit later on from our early lacks and vices. Bush proceeded, however, to turn the end of the war into a mighty fashion show for himself. How well he wore the uniform he had not honored while in service! Jack Kennedy, a war hero, never put on a uniform while he was Commander-in-Chief. Nor did General Eisenhower. They were the President first. George W. Bush who might, if he had been entirely on his own, have made a world-class male model for advertisers (since he never takes an awkward photograph) proceeded to tote the helmet and sport the uniform, one more great guy among the guys, no, you cannot stop a man who has never been embarrassed by himself. Let us hope that our democracy can survive these endless foulings of the nest.