

The White Man Unburdened

Norman Mailer

Exeunt: lightning and thunder, shock and awe. Dust, ash, fog, fire, smoke, sand, blood, and a good deal of waste now move 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 some weapons are uncovered in Iraq, it is likely that even more have been moved to new hiding places beyond the Iraqi border. Should horrific events take place, we can count on a predictable response: "Good, honest, innocent Americans died today because of evil al-Qaeda terrorists." Yes, we will hear the President's voice before he even utters such words. (For those of us who are not happy with George W. Bush, we may as well recognize that living 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. The host of responses has already produced a cognitive stew. But 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 victims. Nowhere is any emphasis put upon the fact that many of the bodies were of the Shiites of southern Iraq who have been decimated repeatedly in the last twelve years for daring to rebel against Saddam in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War. Of course, we were the ones who encouraged them to revolt in the first place, and then failed to help them. Why? There may have been an ongoing argument in the first Bush administration which was finally won by those who believed 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 Iraqi Shiites, it would be hard for us to prove to them that they were not the victims of a double cross. So they may look upon the graves that we congratulate ourselves for having liberated as sepulchral voices calling out from their tombs—asking us to take a share of the blame. Which, of course, we will not.

Yes, our guilt for a great part of those bodies remains a large subtext and Saddam was creating mass graves all through the 1970s and 1980s. He killed Communists en masse in the 1970s, which didn't bother us a bit. Then he slaughtered tens of thousands of Iraqis during the war with Iran—a time when we supported him. A horde of those newly discovered graves go back to that period. Of course, real killers never look back.

The administration, however, was concerned only with how best to expedite the war. They hastened to look for many a justifiable reason. The Iraqis were a nuclear threat; they were teeming with weapons of mass destruction; they were working closely

with al-Qaeda; 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 our need to get a choke-hold on the Middle East for many a reason more than Israel-Palestine. We had to sell the war on false pretenses.

The intensity of the falsification could best be seen as a reflection of the enormous damage 9/11 has brought to America's morale, particularly the core—the corporation. All the organization people high and low, managers,

had each suffered a separate and grievous loss of face. Increasing joblessness was undermining national morale. Since our administration was conceivably not ready to tackle any one of the serious problems looming before them that did not involve enriching the top, it was natural for the administration to feel an 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. Any major excuse would do—nuclear threat, terrorist nests, weapons of mass destruction— we could always make the final claim



President Bush walking with a Navy aviator to the S-3B Viking plane that flew him to the USS Abraham Lincoln to announce the end of combat in Iraq, Coronado, California, May 1, 2003

division heads, secretaries, salesmen, accountants, market specialists, all that congeries of corporate office American, plus all who had relatives, friends, or classmates who worked in the Twin Towers—the shock traveled into the fundament of the American psyche. And the American working class identified with the warriors who were lost fighting that blaze, the firemen and the police, all instantly ennobled.

It was a political bonanza for Bush provided he could deliver an appropriate sense of revenge to the millions—or is it the tens of millions?—who identified directly with those incinerated in the Twin Towers. When Osama bin Laden failed to be captured by the posess we sent to Afghanistan, Bush was thrust back to ongoing domestic problems that did not give any immediate suggestion that they could prove solution-friendly. The economy was sinking, the market was down, and some classic bastions of American faith (corporate integrity, the FBI, and the Catholic Church—to cite but three)

that we were liberating the Iraqis. Who could argue with that? One could not. One could only ask: What will the cost be to our democracy?

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.

In such a pass, how could the White House fail to use them? They would prove quintessential morale-builders to a core element of American life—those tens of millions of Americans who had been spiritually wounded by 9/11. They could also serve an even larger group, which had once been near to 50 percent of the population, and remained key to the President's political footing. 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. A dream opponent. A desert war 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—of which the UN was the first. 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.

And there were other factors for using our military skills, minor but significant: these 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 has withered in the glare. Even the consolation of rooting for his team on TV had been skewed. For many, 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 Wrestling Federation—remnants of a once great and glorious white athletic centrality.

Of course, there were sports fans who loved the stars 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. He needed to take care of his more 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 hipped on sports can get overaddicted to victory. Sports, the corporate ethic (advertising), and the American flag had become a go-for-the-win triumvirate that had developed many psychic connections with the military.

After all, war was, with all else, the most dramatic and serious extrapolation of sports. The concept of victory could be seen by some as the noblest species of profit in union with patriotism. So Bush knew that a big victory in an easy war would work for the good

white American male. If blacks and Hispanics were representative of their share of the population in the enlisted ranks, still they were not a majority, and the faces of the officer corps (as seen on the tube) suggested that the percentage of white men increased as one rose in rank to field and general officers. Moreover, we had knockout 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 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.

In the course, however, of all the quick events of the last few months, our military passed through a transmutation. Indeed, it was one hellion of a morph. We went, willy-nilly, from a potentially great athlete to serving as an emergency intern required to operate at high speed on an awfully sick patient full of frustration, outrage, and violence. Now in the last month, even as the patient is getting stitched up somewhat, 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 overrated tank of blubber, do you need us more than ever? And Iran, watch it, we have eyes for you. You could be a real meal. Because when we fight, we feel good, we are ready to go, and then go some more. We have had a taste. Why, there's a basketful of billions to be made in the Middle East just so long as we can stay ahead of the trillions of debts 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 legitimate 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 finesse and finagling, into a now-tainted but still almighty hymn: Hail to the Chief!

No, we will rise no higher than the spiritual understanding of our leadership. And now that the ardor of victory has begun to cool, some will see how it is flawed. For we are 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 some of the best button-pushers around to believe that we won a noble and necessary contest when, in fact, the opponent was a hollowed-out palooka whose monstrosities were ebbing into old age.

Perhaps he was not that old. Perhaps Saddam made a decision to go underground with as much wealth as he had spirited away, and would fund al-Qaeda or some extension of it in a collaboration of sorts with Osama bin Laden—a new underground team, the Incompatible Terrorist Twins. That is a 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 a leader who has never been embarrassed by himself. What is to be said of a man who spent two years in the Air Force of the National Guard (as a way of not having to go to Vietnam) 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 our youth that can cause us shame on reflection. It is a mark of maturation that we do not try to profit from our early lacks and vices but do our best to learn from them. Bush proceeded, however, to turn his declaration of the Iraqi campaign's end into a mighty fashion show. He chose—this overnight clone of Honest Abe—to arrive on the deck of the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* on an S-3B Viking jet that came in with a dramatic tail-hook landing. The carrier was easily within helicopter range of San Diego but G.W. would not have been able to show himself in flight regalia, and so would not have been able to demonstrate how well he wore the uniform he had not honored. Jack Kennedy, a war hero, was always in civvies while he was commander in chief. So was General Eisenhower. George W. Bush, who might, if he had been entirely on his own, have made a world-class male model (since he never takes an awkward photograph), proceeded to tote the flight helmet and sport the flight suit. There he was for the photo-op looking like one more great guy among the great guys. Let us hope that our democracy will survive these nonstop foulings of the nest. □