

FROM A WARTIME

By Michael Ventura

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On a conundrum: To pretend coherence at this incoherent moment in history ... is an exercise as dishonest as it is pointless. Grieving the dead and injured ... disgusted at the mendacity of leaders on all sides ... spending hours a day amassing facts and lies, too many of both to keep track of ... just one of the many on all sides, trying to take a stand while the ground is shaking beneath our feet, no matter where we are, no matter if the ground is shaken by the explosion of a bomb or the explosion of our assumptions and dreams ... and always the constant awareness that as we speak combatants in Iraq fight and die while Iraqi citizens (half of whom are children) go about their business, or try to, and are killed ... and all the while I compile a disarray of notes because my job, stripped to its simplest description, is to *say something*, though my private inclination is silent shock and awe. I shouldn't be shocked: No year of my life has been free of some war somewhere. But nothing can blunt my awe at the human capacity for catastrophe. Silence is not an option. Especially when our public discourse is largely a cacophony of rants. The task is to speak, not spew. Because when so many are dying needlessly there seems something obscene about any yell, even a yell of outrage.

On usage: We're so accustomed to lies we barely notice the biggest. There was no headline that said honestly: AMERICA INVADES IRAQ. We hear "coalition" and "allies." The media has meekly acceded to the Bush administration's usage, but every time they employ those words they reinforce and spread one whopper of a lie. There is no coalition. There are a quarter million Americans; 30,000 English; 2,000 Australians; plus (it would be ridiculous if it wasn't pathetic) 200 Poles. (Spain, supposedly a major ally, offered no troops.) Depending on who's talking -- Bush, Rumsfeld, Fleischer -- there's also a "list" of 35, 40-odd, or 55 nations who are somehow "with" us. Bill Keller put it well in *The New York Times* (March 22): "Much as I respect Estonia and El Salvador, there is something ridiculous about the list of our 'partners' -- a coalition of the anonymous, the dependent, the halfhearted and the uninvolved, whose lukewarm support supposedly confers some moral authority." *America* is invading Iraq, with no provocation but unproven allegations that half of our uninformed, poorly educated people can't help but believe. Governments that support Bush's war do so in defiance of citizenries that are overwhelmingly against it. Is the extent to which "coalition" has entered America's vocabulary a measure of our hypocrisy and arrogance? Or can we simply not believe, are we utterly unable to conceive, that so many feel so passionately that America is in the wrong? We repeat a word that has no meaning to cloak an act that has no justification.

On military honor: Generals cannot, as a rule, command by lies. Ours learned this the hard way in Vietnam. On and off the record, they often say what politicians won't. Maj. Gen. Peter Wall, second in command of British troops, speaking of Iraqi uprisings in cities where it was thought the invaders would be welcomed: "We don't know what has spurred them; we don't know the scale; we don't know the scope of it; we don't know where it will take us." *The New York Times*, March 27, a "senior uniformed officer at the Pentagon": "We underestimated the capacity of [Saddam's] paramilitary forces. They

have turned up where we didn't expect them to, and they have fought with more resourcefulness than we expected." No lies, no excuses. In both the preparation and the conduct of this war, people in uniform, especially those actually doing the fighting, have talked the straightest.

On the fortunes of war: Some hapless Marine raised the American flag, briefly, in Umm Qasr. Arab television filmed it, and it enflamed Iraq and the entire Arab world. On March 26, *The New York Times* reported that "something unexpected is happening [in Jordan], Iraq's neighbor to the south ... some 4,330 Iraqis have returned [to their country] in the last 10 days, officials say, a kind of reverse refugee flow from safety in Jordan to their now very violent homeland. (No refugees have crossed into Jordan, unlike the million or so who did so in the Persian Gulf War in 1991.) And many Iraqis here -- mostly Shiite Muslims who complained about their bad treatment under Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated government -- are now saying they are against the war, and will fight American troops and, perhaps most surprisingly, now side with the man they once called their oppressor." What does Donald Rumsfeld, who predicted that Iraqis would greet Americans with music and flowers, think? What will our poor soldiers think? What will happen to their morale, their conviction of purpose and self-worth, if after being told by Bush that they are "liberators" they are reviled and attacked by the people they thought they were liberating?

On the Arab Jesus: Most Americans aren't aware of it, and the media ignores it, but Islam reveres the Bible as a sacred text. Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, are especially honored in Muslim traditions. Muslims tell beautiful stories of Jesus, and pass down teachings that are not found in the Gospels but sound very much like the Jesus of Matthew, Luke, and Mark. For instance, there is an Arabic inscription on a city gate of Fatepuhr-Sikri in India. It reads: "Jesus, on whom be peace, has said: 'This world is a bridge. Pass over it, but do not build your dwelling there.'"

You can read such passages in Biblical scholar Marvin Meyer's compilation, *The Unknown Saying of Jesus*. (A gaudy silly title -- the sayings can't be unknown if they're in the book -- but a serious work.) I like the lilt of Islam's Jesus:

"If you can be innocent as doves regarding God, do so. Nothing is more innocent than a dove. For you may take its two nestlings from under it and kill them, and yet later the dove will return to that very place and bring forth other nestlings there again."

And this, a passage preserved in the Middle Ages by Muhammed 'Ata ur-Rahim: "Jesus the Messiah used to take nothing with him except for a comb and a jug. Then he saw a person combing his beard with his fingers, so he threw away the comb, and he saw another person drinking from a river with his hands, so he threw away the jug."

The theologian Al-Ghazzali passed on this exchange: "The followers said to Jesus, 'How is it that you can walk on water and we cannot?' He said to them, 'What do you think of the dinar and the dirham [pieces of money]?' They answered, 'They are precious.' He said, 'But to me they are like dirt.'"

Bush would not like to hear this saying of the Arab Jesus: "Whoever seeks the world is like one who drinks seawater. The more he drinks, the more his thirst increases, until it kills him."

Again from Al-Ghazzali: "When Jesus was asked, 'How are you this morning?' he would answer, 'Unable to anticipate what I hope for or put off what I fear, bound by my works, with all my good in someone else's hand. There is no poor person poorer than I.'"

But my favorite is this exchange, very much like a parable, which Al-Ghazzali received in turn from Malik bin Dinar:

Jesus and his disciples were walking down a road when they passed the carcass of a dog. The disciples covered their noses, complaining, "This dog stinks!" But Jesus was smiling, looking at the dog, and he said: "Its teeth are so white!"

Even in the stinking carcass of a dog, the Arab Jesus finds delight. Not its stench, but the whiteness of its teeth, matters to him. I have always thought it significant and inaccurate that nowhere in our Gospels does Jesus smile or laugh -- significant, because we've made such a glum figure of one who relished not worldly life but the glowing possibility of each moment; inaccurate, because it's unlikely that a man so full of life, who enjoyed feasts and wine and the company of sinful men and loose women, never laughed. What can we gain by heeding a prophet, or worshipping a god, who couldn't smile? "Its teeth are so white!" And then he must have laughed.

The civilization that has preserved and valued such tales is not my enemy.

When I read and watch the painful news of this misbegotten war, I think of the humble, realistic Arab version of Jesus who said: "I have treated the person with leprosy and the blind person, and I have cured them, but when I have treated the fool, I have failed to cure him."

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