

PLACES YOU NEVER HEARD OF

By Michael Ventura

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They mostly come from places you never heard of. They come from country towns where family farms can't compete with agribusiness, and they come from small or midsize cities that have been stripped of factories. I'm speaking of our dead in Iraq. (And did you know more Americans were killed in July, after Iraq was "turned over" to the Iraqis, than were killed in June? Titles and ruling bodies change, but the war remains ours.) When lists of our dead are published, information is generally confined to name, rank, age, military unit, and residence or place of birth. On these lists, big cities are rare – and it's a fair bet that, overwhelmingly, those from the big cities are people of color. (Unemployment rates for people of color run into double digits.) Most of our dead come from the little places that the 21st century has left behind. We have made a collective decision to construct a military that depends on the poverty of such places, sending kids from the middle of nowhere to die at the ends of the Earth. Or rather, sending them to die in the middle of another nowhere, in places they can neither spell nor pronounce, to fight and/or govern people they cannot speak to, amidst a culture about which they have only the vaguest misconceptions. They are conscripts not by an act of Congress but by economic default. The factories that employed their fathers are now in China or some such place. Other people in other countries do the work that their fathers assumed was a birthright, while they serve and die, for little or no reason, and we are no safer for their sacrifice.

If that is a military to be proud of, somebody else will have to be proud of it. I'm proud of our people in uniform, but I can't be proud of how they got into their uniforms. I'm proud of their capacity for sacrifice, but not of how or why they've been sacrificed. And when I read the list of the places they left in order to die – places they no doubt wanted to see again – I read of a desperate America, an America with fewer and fewer choices about where to go and how to live.

Here is an excerpt from a list published in *The Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 11, 2003, titled, "An Honor Roll of Sacrifice in Iraq." What follows covers the first weeks of the war, from March 20 through June 17, 2003, and I repeat only the place names. I suggest you read it aloud. It'll get to you. It is a new American geography – a geography of places with fewer and fewer choices, fewer and fewer opportunities, where the young would rather risk death than endure the death-in-life of towns where most shops on Main Street have long since been boarded up. Mostly these are places you've never heard of, places you could drive through in minutes, places we have no reason to remember anymore except for how their children have become names on a list of the dead:

Waterville, Maine ... Saint Anne, Illinois ... Houston ... Baltimore ... Harrison County, Mississippi ... Los Angeles ... La Mesa, California ... Smithville, Missouri ... Buffalo, New York ... Easton, Pennsylvania ... Portland, Oregon ... Roswell, Georgia ... Brownsville, Texas ... Ventura, California ... Cedar Key, Florida ... Barnwell, South Carolina ... Buffalo, New York ... Waterford, Connecticut ... Sparks, Nevada ... Cleveland ... El Paso ... Fort Meyers, Florida ... Costa Mesa, California ... Decatur, Illinois ... Los Angeles ... Boiling Springs, South Carolina ... Mobile, Alabama ... Enfield, Connecticut

... Comfort, Texas ... El Paso ... Gallatin, Tennessee ... Tuba City, Arizona ... Tonopah, Nevada ... Hanna, Wyoming ... San Diego ... Bedford Heights, Ohio ... Thornton, Colorado ... Kansas City, Missouri ... Phoenix ... Broken Arrow, Oklahoma ... La Harpe, Illinois ... Davenport, Iowa ... Hobart, Indiana ... Los Angeles ... Little Rock, Arkansas ... Richmond, Virginia ... Santa Rosa, California ... Boise, Idaho ... White Lake Township, Michigan ... Tracy, California ... San Luis, Arizona ... Fayetteville, North Carolina ... Roy, Utah ... Conyers, Georgia ... Howell, New Jersey ... Conyers, Georgia (again) ... Escondido, California ... New York City ... Highland, New York ... Sherwood, Oregon ... Troutville, Florida ... Saint George, Delaware ... Evansville, Indiana ... Roscoe, Illinois ... Wellsville, Kansas ... Lansdale, Pennsylvania ... Springfield, Virginia ... Durham, North Carolina ... Dracut, Massachusetts ... El Paso ... Ohio City, Ohio ... Bennington, Vermont ... Granbury, Texas ... Flint, Michigan ... Rochester, New York ... Mesa, Arizona ... Coahoma, Texas ... Hinesville, Georgia ... Burlington, Vermont ... Savannah, Georgia ... Ogden, Utah ... Seaford, Delaware ... Harborcreek, Pennsylvania ... Longmont, Colorado ... Arvada, Colorado ... Hart, Michigan ... Holtville, California ... State College, Pennsylvania ... Lake Charles, Louisiana ... Lewiston, Maine ... Ogallala, Nebraska ... Mount Vernon, New York ... San Diego ... Pembroke, Massachusetts ... Griffith, Indiana ... Rehoboth, Massachusetts ... Tampa, Florida ... Apollo, Pennsylvania ... Jackson, Mississippi ... Chicago ... Forestport, New York ... Birmingham, Alabama ... Tampa, Florida ... Amarillo, Texas ... Malden, Illinois ... Clifton, Virginia ... Forth Worth, Texas ... San Antonio ... Rawlings, Maryland ... Danville, Virginia ... Natchez, Mississippi ... Temperance, Michigan ... Sacramento ... Howell, Michigan ... Clio, Michigan ... Pendleton, Oregon ... San Clemente, California ... Willingboro, New Jersey ... New York City ... Indio, California ... Winchester, Virginia ... Paterson, New Jersey ... Troy, Alabama ... Dresden, Tennessee ... Hialeah, Florida ... Midland, Michigan ... Rock Springs, Wyoming ... Spring, Texas ... Portage, Indiana ... Tuscaloosa, Alabama ... Snow Camp, North Carolina ... Ridgecrest, California ... Delano, California ... Springfield, Missouri ... East Lansing, Michigan ... Coeburn, Virginia ... Hamilton, Ohio ... Vancouver, Washington ... King Hill, Idaho ... Lead, South Dakota ... Columbus, Ohio ... Anderson, Indiana ... Schaumburg, Illinois ... Norwalk, California ... Elgin, South Carolina ... Irvington, Illinois ... Blackshear, Georgia ... Otsego, Michigan ... Chino, California ... New York City ... Niles, Ohio ... Aurora, Illinois ... Eureka, California ... Beaver Dam, Wisconsin ... San Marcos, California ... Omaha, Nebraska ... Shawnee, Oklahoma ... Hilliard, Florida ... Buffalo, New York ... Hamburg, Iowa ... Flint, Michigan ... Brookfield, Wisconsin ... Odessa, Missouri ... Canon City, Colorado ... Tampa, Florida ... Utica, Mississippi ... San Diego, Texas ... Warren, Pennsylvania ... Emerson, New Jersey ... Milton, Pennsylvania ... New Site, Mississippi ... Poteau, Oklahoma ... Edina, Missouri ... Indianapolis ... Pulaski, Virginia ... Somerset, Ohio ... Stockbridge, Georgia ... Shelbyville, Indiana ... Lufkin, Texas ... Apex, North Carolina.

And so it goes. Every day there are a few more names from a few more nowhere towns – towns made "nowhere" not because they were incapable or insignificant, but because a "free market," run by the 1% who profit from the Bush tax cuts, decided Asia or Latin America could contribute more to their portfolio than Utica, Miss., or Apex, N.C., or Flint, Mich.

A few years ago I was invited to observe a city council meeting in Mason, Texas. A man and a woman from a state agency made a presentation. They cited a remarkable statistic:

In rural American towns, most of the top third of the high school graduating class leaves the state. Most of the middle third leaves the town, heading for the state's major cities. The bottom third stays put and becomes the future of the town (or what's left of the town). It isn't a matter of smarts. Many of the top third may be the unimaginative, who do by rote what their teachers demand. Many of the bottom third may be the rebellious, whose creativity is unwelcome and marginalized. The ones who get out know how to play the 21st century's games; the ones who stay, don't or won't – and this is the people-pool that feeds our military. They join up in hope, go where they're sent, do their best, give their all, while the 21st century plays them, using them as chips in a sad, bad game. The lucky live; the unlucky end up on a list; the *really* unlucky are among the thousands of seriously wounded who are dependent on the very veterans' benefits that the Bush people, who've never served in combat, continue to cut, cut, cut. They cut taxes for the rich and cut benefits for the veterans – a lose-lose game for ... Lufkin, Texas ... Edina, Missouri ... Shawnee, California.

Support our troops: End this travesty. One way is to elect a president who knows what it means to be wounded in combat. Another way is to support a just draft: We'll endure fewer useless wars if the affluent are no longer allowed to let other people's kids die for their fantasies of power.

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