

POSSESSED BY WAR

By Michael Ventura

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That was my editor on the phone, asking me whether I wanted to go to Saudi Arabia if there's a war. "If?" I said. For we all know, even as I write a week before January 15: there will be a war. The coffee tastes of war, the sky looks like war, the service station smells of war. A musty foul tinge stains life now: this presence of war. Not just any war (somewhere there's been a war every day I've been alive), but a war with an unusually virulent capacity to infect the future.

Go to Saudi Arabia? Be a "war correspondent"? I suppose I should have expected that call, yet as I hung up the receiver I felt a strangeness, a sense that this request was more than it seemed. Sitting up into the night I thought:

"So – through my friend and boss, this war is calling to me, as it is calling many others. I wonder if Kit knows that he is a kind of mouthpiece for the war. The war has overtaken, perhaps even overwhelmed, his function of newspaper editor and made him turn to a friend and ask what otherwise he would ask only in the most extreme personal emergency: that this friend put himself in danger. So that's not Kit on the phone; that's the war itself calling. *That* is the power of war: that in its name, and by its sanction, you do what you never would otherwise consider. And the fact that his request seems perfectly reasonable to both of us, however much we like to think of ourselves as independent men, testifies to the authority with which war speaks to us and through us."

I've got to sort this out and decide whether or not to go. For you need a reason to go on such an adventure, and it had better be your very own reason. The stakes are too high to submit to any other. I don't know why I didn't think about dying or about the loved ones I'd leave, except that I never think enough of my health or my loved ones. I was thinking only of my life as a writer. So why should a writer go to this war?

For the experience, some would say. Which may be forgivable in someone 20 years younger than I am, hungry for great formative events and imagining that the world (rather than one's heart) provides them. Others feel not quite here as they go through their daily rounds, and nurse an unconfessed hope that the extremes of the world will shock them into life. But isn't it obscene to approach the ghastly suffering of war as a kind of theme park for spiritual tourists hoping finally to grow up?

What about going for the deeper reason of experiencing war in order to understand this phenomenon that, in effect, is history? Understanding is surely a transcendent motive.

Well, maybe, but not always. The assumption is that to "see action" to look upon the dead in the desert sun, to experience what this war will be, is a justifiable means to an end. Just because the end is "understanding" rather than "oil" doesn't alter the fact that war has become, for you, a means. And a means to an end is *always* war's rationale. Thus, like the politicians who set the thing off, you accept the war for your purposes just as those politicians accept it for theirs. Your beliefs may be against it but not your behavior. To go is to participate. *Any* acceptance of war feeds the war fever. Justifies the process. *Is* the war. The seeker-after-truth is as culpable as the soldier or the president. For all of them, war is not only a theme park, but a career move.

What about going to the Middle East simply as a journalist reporting the war? To bear witness. Isn't that a legitimate, perhaps even exalted function? The military will lie and we will tell the truth. Especially we of the "alternative" press. We'll give you a vision of this war that you can't get anywhere else.

In the Vietnam War this view had some validity. It is strange to remember that in those days Americans assumed their government did not lie. Now they know. The polls show that few believe we're liberating Kuwait; everybody knows it's about oil. The polls also show (as if Vietnam wasn't proof enough) that most Americans don't care how many civilians we bomb, or what we bomb them with, so long as we win and get out fast. The people know the drill: the president and the Pentagon will lie; they will justify their lies as essential to national security; some journalists will uncover some of the lies. But the people already know they're being lied to. The Pentagon knows they know. We have reached a point, on a national level, where the specific lie doesn't matter much. The phenomenon of the *acceptance* of lying matters enormously, but the lies themselves are judged for their entertainment value. Tune into *Nightline*, watch C-Span and CNN, talk about it with your friends. There's a bit of a scandal, somebody's disgraced, but what changes? In such an ambience, is bearing witness a useful fact? Or is it just a liberal's way of feeling included in history while remaining as powerless as ever? A way of participating in the war while appearing to protest?

How many times must the story of war's horror be told? I believe Matthew Brady's photographs. I believe *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Dispatches*. I believe *War and Peace* and *The Naked and the Dead*. I believe *Guernica* and *Apocalypse Now*. At what point does the repetition of the story become a way of ignoring its truth? A way of not hearing? Art about the horrors of war has become part of the expected ritual of war. Anticipated. Accepted. Ignored. Ignored because it is experienced by most as just another way to participate. As writer and reader, how long until we understand this? When do we say, "Enough, I'm convinced, I believe, I will act on that belief." Because if we believe these depictions of war, then how can we, directly or indirectly, ever participate again?

Finally, there is this:

The American men and women in the desert are no more or less real to me than the Iraqi civilians and soldiers. All seem to be equally caught in a terrible moment, equally duped by leaders without conscience. Powerless, they await whatever the tumult brings. In my heart I can take no sides. But if I go there, even as a writer, my stake changes. If I'm with a combat outfit on the ground in Saudi Arabia, I want them very much to win. I suddenly have an enormous stake in the success of the policies of George Bush. If he can save me and these soldiers by bombing Iraq senseless, I'm not going to have mixed feelings about that, at least not right then. But . . . 45 percent of the population of Iraq is under 14.

Is Saddam Hussien really so important that we are willing to massacre a nation that's half children rather than wait another six months, another year, for economic sanctions to work? Is our prestige that important? Is our prosperity, such as it is, that important? There's no way around it: if I am on the ground with the allied forces in the Middle East, I have a stake in the deaths of those children. Allowing oneself to be in that position, no matter who you are or what your function may be, is either tragically stupid or deeply immoral, depending on whether or not you knew what you were getting into. It

is a forgetting of one's soul. And that's further than I'm willing to go for my country or my profession.

That's my decision, then. The motives of getting experience, gaining understanding, and bearing witness, like the motives of freeing Kuwait and crushing the tyrants and just incidentally controlling the oil – are in the end excuses for succumbing to the magnetism of war.

Any so-called reason to play one's part in war invites possession – a kind of demonic possession, possession by the war energy. It works this way: The war finds some personal emptiness in you (inexperience, ambition, illusion) and rushes to fill it. Suddenly you are not yourself. You are more and you are less. Less *because* you are more: because the “more” that you feel is not really a part of you. It's imposed by something alien: the war. You are living in its name and by its energy. So when its over, when it leaves, you are drained and diminished.

This helps explain the confusion of the veterans of the Second World War who, after doing such amazing things, became mere suburbanites. It was baffling to them, that what they felt during their war could simply disappear. They didn't know those feelings weren't really their own. Vietnam veterans fought a more crazed, surreal conflict. Many are still in deep shock and shame at having, through no graver fault than being young, opened themselves up to war possession. The war demon used them viciously, then viciously cast them off. Many who speak of it, have a presence like that of women who've been raped.

Entire populations sometimes feel this way. It's a feeling not confined to people who directly participate directly in a war, or people who are “for” a war. Many who are “against” a war can also be possessed by the war energy. It can be very exciting, having a war to protest. Your small personal life takes on cosmic historical significance. It *feels* like you're gaining stature, but actually you're at risk of losing your identity. As a protester you, like the soldier, are not quite yourself. You are yourself plus the war. If you lean too heavily on that role of protester, when your movement has no more war to protest. You too will feel diminished, lost, less. War is dangerous to *everyone*, on all sides of the issues. Being against war doesn't insulate you from its demonic properties.

I don't in any way mean to discourage protest against our Middle East war. It is a gruesomely stupid venture for the worst of motives; its consequences will be horrible; we need to stand against it. I am only saying: Take good care. The quality of war is that it seeps into everything. Into you.

That is why two friends, otherwise not unintelligent, an editor and a writer, could have a conversation that in effect went: “Saddam Hussein and George Bush are about to commit mass murder, and to coerce many others to do likewise, so shouldn't you participate?” “It seems like I should, doesn't it? Isn't that my job?” This conversation didn't take place between two people; it took place between where the war had lodged in one where the war had lodged in the other.

Don't let this war speak through your mouth.

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