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With Saddam caged, the collective human emotion moves from fear to elation

Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart came of age during World War I as an officer in the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. He left the privileged environment of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge to serve as an officer at Ypres and the Somme and there share with citizen soldiers, as Wilfred Owen puts it, "the sorrowful dark of hell / Whose world is but the trembling of a flare."

He was wounded twice and eventually became a company commander. He had seen the world gone mad, again to quote Owen, "there / Where God seems not to care." Yet, according to the wonderful tribute essay by war scholar Professor Sir Michael Howard, Liddell Hart, like many British foot soldiers

who survived the hell of trench warfare, "did not lose [his] faith in the military and social system which had made [such horrors] possible." Instead, he dedicated himself to trying "to think through clearly how such slaughter could have come about and how in the future it could be avoided. War was hell, but mere wishing would not prevent its occurrence." He enunciated a famous dictum, "If you want peace, understand war."

I sat at a cafeteria table this morning with a friend from a similarly privileged background who had done a tour of duty as an officer in the hell of Vietnam. A mounted television screen blared and scrolled information that explained the alternating images of a sleek and satisfied President Bush, a ragged and broken Saddam Hussein, and the cave-like shelter from which Saddam had been extracted "like a rat."

My friend spoke of recently feeling a need to call his brother, who had served as a Marine in Vietnam, on the kind of fraternal emotional impulse many of us have felt at some time for a distant loved one. He discovered that his brother was angry and distraught. A young man whom he had counseled through troubled teen years had found his options limited and joined our all-volunteer army as a way to obtain an education. His education was in Iraq.

My friend's brother had just found out that this boy had become one of the more than 300 U.S. deaths since President Bush declared the major combat phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom over. The anger of this ex-marine counselor was directed against a president who came from privilege and who shirked his duty during the Vietnam War.

The president whom we see on ubiquitous screens elated with the capture

of a powerless former despot in hiding understands war now better than ever. He has landed on an aircraft carrier in a flight suit and posed in front of an orchestrated "Mission Accomplished" banner. He has had a two-hour breakfast in Baghdad, which is so unsafe the leader of the most powerful country in the history of the world had to slink in and out surreptitiously like a thief in the night. How can he possibly grasp how distant peace in Iraq or the Middle East now is? Or how little the capture of Saddam Hussein has to do with the terrorist and factional, religious and cultural hatreds that ferment in the maelstrom of destabilized Iraq and all-but-forgotten Afghanistan?

A reader wrote me lamenting the "total loss of perspective" and "silly euphoria" being promoted by the large "We got him" headline in Monday's American-Statesman. He should

remember that another sober student of war, Carl von Clausewitz, identified as first among the "strange trinity" of factors that make up modern warfare the composite feeling of "violence, hatred and enmity" that "mainly concerns the people." And so we are led by media to convert our hatred and latent fear into euphoria, as if Saddam in chains is something substantial.

George Orwell, who knew combat in the Spanish Civil War, captured this collective channeling of human emotion in "1984." In the two-minute hate, the image of the supposed traitor and enemy Emmanuel Goldstein was flashed on the screen, "a [constant] object of hatred."

A political tool. A figment. A bogeyman. A Saddam Hussein.

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