

## Commentary

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# Laughing at our soldiers' reason for dying

March 21, 2004, marked the anniversary of the first death of an American soldier in combat in Iraq. The death count is now 600 and getting higher. Fifty-nine British soldiers have been killed.

Three days after this solemn anniversary, President Bush attended the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association Dinner in Washington, D.C., as a guest, according to CBS News

chief political writer David Paul Kuhn, of "the talking heads, the television powerful, the broadcast journalists." Our commander-in-chief there delivered a pre-

scripted comedy routine, complete with slides, showing him looking outside White House windows and under a White House couch. He joked, "Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be somewhere." He got lots of laughs.

On the same day in my economical Bed & Breakfast near the building in London that George Orwell used as the model for his Ministry of Truth, I read some day-old news that got no laughs in Great Britain. The Daily Telegraph reported on its front page that 14 British soldiers had been wounded, three seriously, in street protests in Iraq. A large color photograph showed two British soldiers in riot gear, their helmeted heads and upper bodies aflame after being hit by petrol bombs.

The number of U.S. military wounded in Operation Iraqi Freedom and its aftermath now approaches 3,500.

Given such human cost, it is not unreasonable that some people should be concerned about the lack of judgment the president and his advisers showed in dreaming up and delivering this WMD skit. Readers of the Statesman responded strongly with letters to the editor. The fact that these jokes were not "off-the-cuff," but instead planned and approved, gives us cause to wonder whether the president's insulated inner circle understands how ordinary people might feel.

Of even greater concern, in my opinion, is the subsequent politicizing of this episode and the further trivializing of the issue of WMDs as the main reason for launching a pre-emptive military attack against Iraq. You may think I am being a stodgy moralist here and dismiss this whole matter as "a silly controversy" and politically motivated "cheap advantage grabbing," as liberal talk-show host Harry Shearer has. So let me explain.

Corpses, maimed bodies and veterans with wounded psyches are not political matters. Dead men and women no longer have a political affiliation. What the loved ones of soldiers who have died in action — and what soldiers who will bear physical or psychological scars for the rest of their lives — have to believe is that their sacrifice was worth it.

In a profile of Iraqi-war amputee Michael Cain in the March 8 New Yorker magazine, Dan Baum reports that Cain told him he had no regrets and would serve his country again. But Cain vowed that he would never let his son join the army.

Most poignant, however, is what

veteran Steve Reighard, another amputee at Walter Reed Hospital, says: "I believed in what we were doing. If we hadn't gone to war, eventually we'd see chemical arms and those kinds of munitions in our streets." Reighard believes the WMDs matter. Why? As he tells Baum, "You, know, we kind of have to think that. Otherwise, this (missing arm of mine) is in vain."

In this, Reighard and Cain — and bereaved mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, sons and daughters — are no different than their counterparts in previous wars. Those who fight are dead serious about the reasons for their great sacrifice.

When Siegfried Sassoon, the British officer and poet in World War I, sensed that his men were suffering and dying abominably for no clear purpose, he publicly refused to fight until the British government explained its objectives clearly and set a timetable for either achieving them or ending the war.

While in London on leave, Sassoon saw a civilian music review where the chorus sang "the Kaiser loves our dear old tanks."

His poetic response to such obtuse civilian jocularities was savage: "I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls, / Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home sweet Home', / And there'd be no more jokes in music-halls / to mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume."

Next time the White House wants to tell a joke about non-existent weapons, it should try it out first among the wounded veterans at Walter Reed Hospital — and only then take it on the road.

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