

## COMMENTARY

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# What we've lost in the Iraq war

It is said that the first casualty of war is the truth. I am not so sure we can identify the first casualty of Operation Iraqi Freedom so easily.

According to the Center for Public Integrity, truth was a casualty well before our soldiers crossed into Iraq on March 20, 2003. By its reckoning, 935 times the Bush administration "methodically propagated erroneous information" leading to our military action.

Do you remember the name of the first casualty of war? If not, visit [icasualties.org/oif](http://icasualties.org/oif) and scroll down the long and sorrowful Department of Defense Confirmation List, from the six dead of Jan. 27 and 28, 2003, to the first casualty, 2nd Lt. Therrel S. Childers, 30, 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, on March 21, 2003.

Scroll slowly and think about what Walt Whitman told us 145 years ago, reporting from the deplorable Civil War field hospitals outside Washington. Each individual casualty is gone and at rest. But those who remain behind suffer. Wives, mothers, children, fathers and "musing comrades" suffer inexhaustible grief.

We were not given the truth about how Childers died. Embedded reporter Gordon Dillow wrote in *The Orange County Register* that Childers died bravely leading his men against a thinned Iraqi army brigade at an oil pumping station. He was killed, Dillow told us, by a half-dozen Iraqis, some of them elite Republican Guard, wildly shooting an AK-47 out of a speeding Toyota pickup. Childers was heroized, made the subject of a book, "Shane Comes Home" by Rinker Buck, and honored with an official decree by the Mississippi Legislature.

Two tellings later, however, in an oral history of embedded reporting, Dillow gave us something closer to the truth. Childers and his Marines were facing no opposition. They were standing by the side of the road when a civilian vehicle inconspicuously started driving toward them. They were baffled.

No one had told them this war was going to be like Vietnam, with insurgents, explosive devices, assorted inglorious ways of dying.

"All of a sudden," Dillow said, "a guy sticks an AK-47 out and starts shooting and hits the lieutenant in his stomach, just below his protective vest."

Our first combat death was a drive-by shoot-



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Does this matter? It certainly doesn't make Childers any less brave or any less worthy of our admiration, then or now. But if we had known then that the assignment our soldiers had been given would resemble Vietnam more than World War II, it might have changed our readiness to believe that the mission was accomplished by May 1, 2003.

What if we had known what Cpl. Jesse Odom, who tended to his dying officer, later wrote? He heard Childers' "last words on Earth." They were: "It hurts."

Odom continues: "He died a painful death. I was hurt not only because I saw a father type figure go before me, but to see a grown man cry and urinate his pants hit me hard." It would have hit us hard, too, if Dillow had given us what really happened instead of a tale of battlefield glory.

Odom writes, "In reality the war in Iraq is over for me, but emotionally the war will never end. There will be a sight or smell that will bring me back to the battlefield."

He mourns Childers and "damn[s] the terrorist for all the hate, fear and sadness."

Odom's feelings are sincere. We feel their dignity. But quite another casualty of the Iraq War is the unthinking hatred it has let loose. On YouTube, you can view a video song, "We Hate Terrorists," played and recorded by "members of 1/153rd Infantry Battalion during Operation Iraqi Freedom II." In it, we get — in images and words — the Quran as toilet paper, a soldier using his rifle as a phallus, and repeated wishes to skin terrorists alive, sodomize them, and kill them all. Worse still are the six approving comments.

I am sure of one thing. Childers did not die for an America that writes and approves of songs and sentiments like these.

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