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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Pre-empted by the war in Iraq

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Austin American-Statesman Monday, April 19, 2010

There are many ways we can begin looking at the likely legacy of what we have done through our pre-emptive use of military force in Iraq. We are in an end game achieved through a temporary upscaling of military force combined with making payments to factional leaders not to unleash violence.

This so-called surge of men and money was a temporary measure. It is hard to understand why its success is being taken as predictor of any long-term stability.

There are permanent legacies of the commanders in the field and the political leaders in Washington who sent them forth. These have to do with real soldiers and with contractors in charge of rebuilding the infrastructure in Iraq at great expense.

Recently my colleague, Tarek El-Ariss, a professor in Middle Eastern Studies, turned the attention of our Humanities Institute seminar to a blogger, 'river' at Riverbend, a young Iraqi woman who wrote for four years - from Aug. 23, 2003, until Sept. 6, 2007 - from Baghdad. She describes in 2003 the immediate impact of the American invasion: a rapid influx of terrorists and religious extremists who flourish "in times of chaos and disorder." The repressive measures of the extremists undo the existing western-style tolerant harmonies among "moderate Muslims who simply believe(d) in 'live and let live'."

Sunnis and Shi'a, Muslims, Christian and Jews had gotten along with one another. Half the college students and more than 50 percent of the work force were women. The war destroyed that society and took away freedoms from many women, freedoms that have not been restored.

Then the rebuilding began. Iraq had 130,000 engineers, mostly trained in Germany, Japan, the United States and Britain. They knew how to build good bridges using Iraqi labor and materials quickly and cheaply. They had rebuilt bridges destroyed in Desert Storm. The local cost estimate, generously calculated, for the new Diyala Bridge was \$1.2 million. The bid by an American contractor was \$50 million.

When her family left for Syria, in September 2007, "the dirty streets, the ruins of buildings and houses, the smoke-filled horizon all helped (her family) realize how fortunate (they) were to have a chance for something safer." The Iraq they knew was long gone, up in smoke.

At the same seminar meeting we watched Nancy Schiesari's magnificent documentary "Tattooed Under Fire," filmed at the River City Tattoo Parlor in Killeen. There soldiers returning from and

deploying to Iraq get tattooed and tell their stories to the husband and wife parlor owner-operators.

If you think there is glory in the kind of fighting our men and women did or that they feel they accomplished something noble, listen to them explain why they want a tattoo of the grim reaper as a young child, or of a baby in a blender. See where they are going to put the last four digits of the social security numbers of the buddies killed before their eyes.

One medic speaks of the stress of constantly turning off and on the kill/save switch and of the two fellow medics he saw shot down by snipers while handing out soccer balls to kids. He recalls another soldier who died in his arms after having his legs blown away. That soldier said he wished he had made it home to see his daughter. One soldier who is deploying for the fifth time to Iraq declares a clear truth: "The more times I go over, the more of Iraq comes back with me."

You'll notice how young these soldiers are. As Schiesari poignantly remarked, referring to the heinous practice in some areas of the world of using children as young as 11 and 12: "Given how sheltered American kids are from the hard realities of life, these 18-year-old soldiers are our child soldiers."

Ninety-five percent of current soldiers have tattoos. This is one tattoo parlor in one Texas town at one time. The lasting pain and trauma are palpable. Extrapolate and you have another legacy of our pre-emptive war. It has pre-empted for honorable soldiers like those in Killeen the normal joys and sorrows of being young and open to what life has to offer.

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