

Refining cruelty

An army of compassion finds that war is hell



ALMOST FOUR YEARS AGO (APRIL 5, 2003) *WORLD*'s cover headline was "Army of Compassion." Inside, we explained how "embedded humanitarians in the command chain of Operation Iraqi Freedom help make this a genuinely George W. Bush-style operation—as compassionate conservatism goes to war."

Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman would have scoffed at such a campaign. His doctrine was, "War is cruelty. You cannot refine it." He ravaged Georgia and South Carolina in 1864 and 1865, but had he not shown how devastating total war was, the surrender of Robert E. Lee might have been followed by years of guerrilla warfare.

Technological developments over the next 80 years made war even crueler. Machine guns led to the trench slaughter of World War I. Air power led to the bombing of civilians in London and then in German cities. Two nuclear bombs ended the U.S. war against Japan. Regrettable, the Allies acknowledged, but what was the alternative? "War is cruelty. You cannot refine it."

The Bush attempt in Iraq was to refine war. It largely worked at first, due to the advent of "smart bombs": Destroyed military targets often sat next to undamaged civilian structures. *WORLD* did not cheer the advent of war in 2003—we headlined one of my columns "Evil times"—but we like almost all Americans were pleased to see how an emphasis on speed, mobility, and flexibility allowed the

United States to advance to Baghdad in record time.

One source in close contact with President Bush and other administration leaders at that time says the initial lightning victory made them believe that Iraq could be mopped up over the next year—and then it might be on to Syria and Iran. The Bush administration decreed rules of engagement to minimize civilian discomfort. I thought that was good news and even wrote a column about the Bush doctrine replacing the Sherman doctrine—but it turned out that Sherman was right: When an army gains an advantage it has to pound away, not let up.

My early mis-assumption—and far more important, the Bush administration's—became evident quickly: On May 15, 2004, our cover headline read, "WHAT A MESS: U.S. mishandling of postwar Iraq is a recipe for civil war." We quoted Ali Allawi, who was then Iraq's Minister of Defense, saying of the American debacle in Fallujah, "with the imperative of reducing civilian casualties that seems to govern the military doctrine . . . the core of the fighters will get up and reassemble elsewhere and create mayhem at a later date."

Reducing civilian casualties was important for both humanitarian and political reasons, but we were dealing with a culture that interpreted compassion as a lack of seriousness. Islam is a works-based religion

that emphasizes winning: Muhammad and his successors spread the faith by wielding the sword. Following the smashing American victory in 2003, we had the opportunity to impress upon Iraqis who wanted to be winners the idea that they had to cooperate with the winning power, like it or not.

Losing in a Christian culture is not fatal, because many of us grow up believing that seemingly lost causes are the ones worth fighting for. Jesus and the apostles, and their disciples, spread Christianity by losing in worldly terms, even to the point of crucifixion. But Islam does not have a theology of losing. If we had made it clear to our Iraqi opponents that they had no hope of success, Iraq could have settled down.

Just as 19th-century poverty-fighters thought they had to be tough to produce results, so Sherman believed his cause was right and his harshness in war was compassionate over the long term: Opponents would see that guerrilla warfare was useless. Our recent rules of engagement, which reflect our domestic liberal coddling tendencies, have produced a parallel prolongation of trouble.

By not being tough during the first year after taking Baghdad we gave the terrorists new opportunities, and now General David Petraeus is trying to play catch-up. Will he and our forces succeed? Let's hope and pray so, because an American defeat will lead to wider war. "War is hell," Sherman said, and if we don't make it hellish for 10,000 to 15,000 terrorists, they will make it hellish for more of their countrymen and for us. ☉