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## *The Way We War*

**By Leonard Fein**

Soon after World War II, when I was in my teens, I saw the film version of Erich Maria Remarque's novel, "All Quiet on the Western Front." The film, produced in 1930, is set during World War I. It was the first "anti-war" film of the sound era, and much as the war it depicted was trumpeted as "the war to end all wars," the film was regarded as the film to end all wars. See it, and never again would you be able to endorse war.

That is what I believed when I left the movie house after seeing it. The problem was how to get everyone to see it, and my thought was to organize a worldwide movement that would cancel all other movies on an appointed day and require — or at least encourage — the citizens of every country to see that movie.

Who knows what might have been? We do know what was: a second world war, and Korea and Vietnam, and Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo and endless colonial wars, and Chechnya and the Sino-Japanese war and the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, and Israel's wars, and civil wars as far as the eye can see backward or forward, and on and on. Wars large and wars small, wars with bombs and wars with machetes, and as many as 250 million dead of all war-related causes, twice as many of them civilians as soldiers — literally countless wounded, maimed.

After Vietnam, we had "The Deer Hunter," "Apocalypse Now," "Platoon," then, skipping back, "The Saving of Private Ryan," and many less memorable others. Serious movies, meant to bring home the human costs of war in ways journalists only rarely can or do. Serious movies, meant to alert us to the raw horror of the thing, to its endless brutality and its essential inhumanity.

We are nonetheless at war again, and again being told about the heroic rescues, the noble idealism of the fallen. We are again being told of the modest numbers of civilian casualties; we are again being told that if we will only stay the course a bit longer, the virtue of our presence will finally be made manifest. Truth is, again, the first casualty of war.

The truth is that we are losing this war, our war, in Iraq. The truth is that barring an unforeseen and unforeseeable miracle, the elections scheduled in Iraq for January 30, 2005, if they take place at all, will be more testament to the president's stubbornness than to a surge in democratic yearning; they will not bring order to Iraq, nor issue in a government accepted as legitimate by the Iraqi people themselves. The truth is that we do not know how to fight this war or how to win it, and the truth is that while no casualties matter as much as the human casualties, we are suffering costs that go well beyond the deaths inflicted on Iraqis, terrorists and innocents alike; above all these other costs — the fall of the dollar because of the deficit, the depletion of the nation's treasury, the diversion of resources from the necessary defense against terrorism — there is the appalling damage to America's reputation in the world.

Whether we are losing the war because it was based on fragile snippets of information regarding Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, snippets that were nonetheless reported by the CIA as confirming "with high confidence" Iraq's possession of such weapons, because after we defeated the feckless Iraqi army we stood about, scratching our heads, wondering what to do next, or because this is what pretty much always happens to occupying powers — the historians will be debating this one for many decades to come. What matters just now is that we have the decency to rub our noses in the awful hurt we are causing.

It is comforting to respond that it is the death-hungry "rebels" who are causing the hurt, that we are honorably trying to bring it to an end, to pacify and stabilize the country. That is quite so, as far as it goes, but it does not go nearly far enough. We make much of Saddam Hussein's mass graves, but little of the tens of thousands of civilian casualties we have caused. The war we see on scrubbed television is very different from the war seen by those who watch Al Jazeera.

We drown in the daily reports, largely sanitized. We cannot be expected to keep track of the details. But surely we know by now that our presence in Iraq has replaced a totalitarian wretch with something close to perfect insecurity. Surely we know that it will be many months or years before the Iraqis themselves will be adequately competent to protect Iraq's citizens. Surely

we know that the number of terrorist assaults continues to grow, even after Fallujah. (The evidence suggests, in fact, that it is not yet “after Fallujah.”)

Surely we know that American soldiers have committed atrocities and that American officers and policymakers have, at the least, condoned such behavior. And surely we know, must know, that the pain of an Iraqi mother at the death of her children is no easier than the pain of the mother of a slain U.S. Marine.

It is already too late to plead that if we leave prematurely, chaos will follow and our credibility will suffer. There is chaos now, and staying the bloody and useless course is no way to restore America’s tattered reputation or to soften the hatred of America that now spreads like a pandemic across the globe. The tragedy consequent to our occupation is that were we to leave now, the emergence of Iraq as a safe harbor for terrorists is a near certainty. It is that, or an occupation that will last for many years — casualty lists on all sides that will grow, and grow. Damned either way.