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COMMENTARY

Our New National Divide

 By OWEN WEST
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Last month I was running the Central Park loop when a runner wearing a U.S. Marine Corps shirt approached. I alerted the two boys in the jog stroller and my eldest, who met this world with a father in Iraq, shouted, "Semper fi!"



Chad Crowe

The man saw the emblem on my visor and said, "You hear about Doug Zembiec?" If most Americans have six degrees of separation, Marines have no more than two. I nodded and stopped my watch. But all he managed to say was, "That one hurt." Then he plunged down the hill toward 72nd Street, cutting his own path against the flow.

I tried to make sense of it. Not the encounter but the sheer madness of the surroundings. Runners were chattering about school applications and subprime predictions. Yet most of them

told pollsters that Iraq was the single largest anxiety in their lives. Like the majority of the nation, they were exhausted by a war in which they had no role. And they wanted out.

It was 65 degrees in August in Manhattan, about 65 degrees cooler than the temperature in Doug Zembiec's helmet as he approached a Baghdad target house in 90 pounds of equipment. He and his team wanted to be remembered for how they lived and how they helped others live. Inside was a group that cared only how it died.

A Marine company commander during the battle for Fallujah in 2004, Maj. Douglas A. Zembiec was famously profiled by the Los Angeles Times's Tony Perry as an "unapologetic warrior" who was ferocious while fighting al Qaeda in Iraq from house-to-house. "One of the most noble things you can do is kill the enemy," he said, expressing what many soldiers feel but lack the courage to trumpet for fear of being castigated outside the combat zone, as was Marine Gen. James Mattis when he expressed a similar sentiment.

Here in the United States, the vast moral chasm that so clearly separates the combatants in Iraq is too rarely discussed. Disillusion with the entire effort has obscured and in some cases mutated the truth that small numbers of evil men tilt entire populations. Many Americans, including prominent senators, cringe when they hear about warriors like Zembiec going door-to-door, notwithstanding the fact that most Iraqis in the neighborhood greet them as *deus ex machina*.

Nearly six years into the war on terror -- which is being fought by less than 30% of the military and less than one-half of 1% of the nation -- and the stark irony of America in modern war has emerged. Our

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professional warriors who take the most risk believe the nation must commit to a long-term fight that includes Iraq in some form. Overall support for the endeavor wanes with distance.

This divergence isn't new. Those who have battled the enemy up close have always been more heavily invested in the cause. What's different is that in past wars, the nation was tied to its soldiers and had a familial barometer. Today most Americans have never met a Gold Star family, let alone shaken the hand of a fallen soldier. The military community is increasingly insulated even as the burden of global war swells. Within it there are those who drift in and out of the fight according to orders. But there is also a group that is distinctive -- those who join the military to hunt the enemy for a living, and for the rest of us. Doug Zembiec was such a man.

When he first returned from Iraq, Zembiec relinquished command to his friend Maj. Ray Mendoza. Though they came from different backgrounds, like all of our warrior elite they shared an overwhelming martial calling. Doug was an all-American wrestler at Navy. Ray was the top heavyweight wrestler at Ohio State and an Olympic alternate. Their Marines used to joke that if the pair ever fought it would be like the movie "Clash of the Titans."

A year later, on Nov. 14, 2005, Mendoza was leading his company in an attack near the Syrian border when he was struck down. He was the only man killed in his company. I received an email from a lieutenant in his battalion that read, "It was leadership from the front but it's crushing."

Zembiec, who had returned to Iraq for another tour of duty, wrote to Mendoza's two young children. The note was upbeat, blunt and unapologetic. "Your father reminds us there are men willing to fight for people that they don't even know," he wrote. "Even now, as I write this letter in Iraq, I will honor him on the field of battle by slaying as many of our enemies as possible, and fight until our mission is accomplished."

Men who carry rifles for a living do not seek reward outside the guild. The most cherished gift an infantryman receives is a nod from his peers. When Zembiec, "The Lion of Fallujah," fell this May 11 while commanding a raid on insurgent forces in Baghdad, the loss was symbolic of all those men whom the rest of us aspired to be in combat: fearless guardians of our fellow soldiers and our nation. It's not surprising then that more than 1,000 mourners -- generals and enlisted men alike -- attended Doug's memorial service in Annapolis, Md. And when Defense Secretary Robert Gates spoke of his courage at the Marine Corps Association annual dinner in Arlington, Va., he fought back tears.

It has become commonplace to assert that the nation's most precious resource is our children. God knows the debt the nation owes the three little ones Doug and Ray left behind, and the hundreds of other shattered families. But during wartime our greatest asset may be our guardians. We should take solace that while we are off to a terrible start in the long war, having allowed the Iraqi battlefield to embitter and weaken the country, our nation produced men like Mendoza and Zembiec. And right now somewhere some other American walks their tracks.

The public recognizes this blessing. In July's Gallup Poll on America's most trusted institutions, the military ranked highest with a 69% confidence rating. Congress ranked last (below HMOs), with a 14% confidence rating.

So it was surprising to see that, according to an August CNN poll, 68% of Americans said Gen. David Petraeus's congressional testimony on Iraq this week would not sway their personal view one way or the other. Worse, 53% of Americans do not trust him to report what's really going on in Iraq, according to a USA Today/Gallup Poll published Monday.

This wrenching inconsistency indicates a deeper problem than a fickle public or an inherent distrust in

hierarchy. The poisonous partisan climate in Washington has seeped beyond the Beltway and is now harming the public's trust in the institution that will continue to sacrifice most in the coming years. Extremists from both political parties have used Iraq as a zero-sum emotional battle for votes instead of putting the battlefield in proper context.

The evidence of this is the blatant absence of common ground. First, the Republicans declared the enemy in Iraq defeated before we started fighting, later employing invective to attack rational critics of the order of battle. Then Democrats declared the war lost just as we employed a new strategy. Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader, has been especially careless, declaring defeat last spring, labeling the new strategy and the surge in troops a "failure" before it began, slandering an elite warrior in Marine Gen. Peter Pace, and continuously undercutting Gen. Petraeus -- most recently dismissing his forthcoming testimony as "Bush's report."

Monday's MoveOn.org advertisement, which depicted Gen. Petraeus as a traitor, has been dismissed by Sen. Reid as an inconsequential distraction. But according to the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan research group, the ad reflects the growing distrust of a Democratic Party that may be taking cues from its leadership. Last month 76% of Republicans expressed confidence in the military to give an "accurate picture of the war," while only 36% of Democrats did.

This explains the collective skepticism surrounding Gen. Petraeus's comments but does not excuse it. For while the country can thrive as a politically divided nation, its ability to defend itself diminishes alongside faith in the fidelity of the military. The unbalanced portrayal of the conduct of our soldiers has done damage enough. To impugn our warriors' motives as political is thoroughly corrosive and hurts all Americans.

Stepping back from the froth, this week will strengthen the country if our political leaders recognize two things. First they must resist the urge to engage in what traders call "backtrading" and prevent hindsight bias from clouding future decisions. Whether or not the decision to invade Iraq was correct, whether or not our presence created al Qaeda in Iraq or attracted them or emboldened other enemies, we now face the complex task of securing America while living up to some responsibility in Iraq.

Second, they must recognize that a bipartisan course of action must be chosen in the context of a much larger war on terror. If the politicians continue pulling the country apart, this game of chicken will end badly and imperil both Iraq and the U.S. If America were hit tomorrow there would be more finger-pointing than ranks closing. That must change.

Finally, we should remember that Doug Zembiec and Ray Mendoza saw the true face of terror in Fallujah, and it cemented their resolve. Like them, Gen. Petraeus is a guardian whose lifelong calling is service to his country. He knows the enemy. He knows our limitations. And he is telling the truth.

Mr. West, a trader at Goldman Sachs and a director of the Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation, served two tours in Iraq with the Marines.

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