

September Mornings in Maryland & Iraq

By Conn Hallinan | October 12, 2005

In the pre-dawn hours of Sept. 17, 1862, a division of Confederate soldiers moved into place just south of a cornfield near where the Hagerstown Pike runs past a white, clapboard church on its way to the town of Sharpsburg, Maryland. Northeast of the Confederates, Union Major General Joseph Mansfield was getting his XII Corps into line facing a small forest. The lesson of what happened within the shadows cast by those trees—known in thousands of military histories as simply “the East Wood”—is something the Bush administration is letting the nation rediscover these days.

The battle of Antietam, where simple place names like “the cornfield,” the “sunken road,” and “Piper’s farmhouse” became synonymous with almost unimaginable carnage, was the single bloodiest day in U.S. military history. In a single day, armed with muzzle loading rifles and cannons, 20,000 men were wounded, and 6,500 killed. More soldiers died that day than in all the American wars of the 19th century; four times more than fell storming the Normandy beaches.

Early on that terrible day, two units came together in the East Wood. Recruited from small towns in the eastern part of the state, the 1st Texas was a hard-nosed regiment in John Bell Hood’s division. The 12th Massachusetts was Boston-born and -bred, marching off to war behind an enormous flag of white, blue, and gold presented to them by the good women of Beacon Hill.

Within less than a half an hour both units had essentially ceased to exist. The Texas regiment absorbed 82% casualties. The 12th took 334 men into the wood. It came out with 114, most of them wounded. Fewer than three dozen rallied around the colors after the retreat.

Citizen Soldiers

Most regiments in the Civil War were recruited by towns or city neighborhoods. The idea was that you went off into the cauldron of war with your neighbors, friends, even family. Neighbors took care of one another because they had grown up together, worked together, raising barns, sowing and harvesting crops, or laying track. It made sense.

Until they all died together. Then the heart went out of a New York neighborhood, a Boston ward, or a small rural town in Texas or Vermont. If you’re ever back

East, driving the back roads of upstate New York or Connecticut, stop in the village commons and look at the modest granite monuments with their odd stone chains and cement anchored cannons. Read the names carved into the plaques and imagine what this meant to the town in 1862. That there were times—as in a cove of trees on a September morning—when a significant portion of a town, age 18 to 35, just vanished at the places whose names are chiseled on the memorial obelisks: Wilderness, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Cold Harbor. Multiply those names by siblings, parents, grandparents, spouses, children, and friends, and you begin to understand the special way that particular war affected the country.

After the Civil War, the U.S. Army realized it wasn’t a good idea to put a whole town or city in harm’s way. They got rid of local regiments, so if a unit took a beating, the burden wouldn’t fall on one town or region. It made sense.

Changing the Rules

The exceptions were the National Guard and the Reserves, who were still recruited by locale. That made sense as well. These people were weekend warriors. If there was a real national emergency, like World War II, then you had some trained people in place, but most joined for the educational grants and small stipends that came with the job. And to hang out with people they knew.

But if you happened to be in Iraq with the Georgia National Guard’s 1st Battalion, 108 Armored, serving together meant dying together. On the week of July 18, four of them made it into the *New York Times*’ death watch list. Don’t bother looking up their towns in your Rand McNally. Hiram, Norcross, Douglasville,

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)



and Sharpsburg (some irony there) are too small to show up. Most are probably not all that different than the towns those boys from the 1st Texas came out of more than 140 years ago.

They died because the Bush administration changed the rules.

The Guard and Reserves were mobilized only nine times between World War I and the Gulf War, so members figured it was a pretty good bet they wouldn't be dying in a war. But they lost that bet. In the past 12 years they have been called up 11 times, with deployments lasting 12 to 15 months and more. Since Sept. 1, 2001, more than 300,000 have been mobilized, and they make up 35% of the troops in Iraq.

The reason is simple: they're cheap. Reserve and Guard troops are much less expensive than regular troops, because the military only foots the bill for them when they are on active duty. When they come home, they're on their own. As conservative Christopher Caldwell at the *Weekly Standard* notes, "It is hard not to see a similarity between the army's shift to part-time soldiering and businesses preferences for part-time vs. full-time labor." Think of it as a sort of temp agency armed with the latest in firepower.

So is this about saving money? It certainly is not about saving lives or mental well being. According to the British *Guardian*, 75% of the troops shipped home for mental health reasons are reservists, and their casualty rate is greater per capita than regular troops.

No, it's about getting elected.

Budgets and Bodies

The military budget is going up, not down. And don't pay attention to that \$419 billion figure because

it doesn't cover minor things like nuclear weapons, veterans' benefits, Homeland Defense, or the actual cost of the war. Pull everything together, hit the add button, and the figure is more like \$700 billion.

The soldiers won't see any of that money. The average front-line trooper makes \$16,000, the same as a Wal-Mart clerk, and according to *Nickel and Dimed* author, Barbara Ehrenreich, more than 25,000 military families are eligible for foot stamps.

The arms corporations are another matter. Lockheed-Martin (the largest arms corporation in the world), Boeing, and Northrop Grumman will corner one out of every four of those dollars.

In gratitude, the defense industry pours money back into the election cycle at a rate of 65% for the Republicans, 35% for the Democrats (and there are lots of them that take the 20 pieces of silver).

Iraq has pretty much broken the Guard. Retired General Barry McCaffrey told the Senate that the organization is "in meltdown and in 24 months we will be coming apart." Like the 12th Massachusetts, there won't be many left to rally 'round the colors.

But if you're a Republican or a Blue Dog Democrat, the only important thing is getting re-elected. So the Guard and the Reserves will be fed into the Iraq meat grinder until there aren't any more of them, and then the aerospace industry can just flatten the place.

In the meantime little towns in Georgia and Ohio will bury their dead, while Lockheed Martin figures out how to fix the next election.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2005. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Recommended citation:

(Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus,).

Web location:

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