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A Reporter's Report on Washington.

I come before you counting days, as I have every morning and night for the past few years. The bad news is that on today, October 26, there will be four hundred and fifty-one days left in the reign of King George Bush the II. The good news is that tomorrow morning, when we all awake, there will be one less day. And that is pretty much the extent of the good news.

We in American – and the West -- are living in a time of terrible crisis, much of it self-inflicted, that began with the horror of September 11, and has been abetted and amplified by the subsequent horrors of the Bush Administration. As I write this, in early August, my President has not yet ordered a bombing and missile attack on the mullahs in Iran, but it is an attack he believes that it is his destiny to carry out --- to save America and the Free World from a future Iran armed with nuclear weapons and with the wherewithal, he believes, to set them off in New York, Washington and other major American cities. The fact that there is no intelligence to support his belief does not matter. We will simply have to wait and see if he does what he thinks he must do, or if he somehow is restrained by the fact that very few people inside Washington – including his fellow Republicans in the Congress and many military leaders in the Pentagon – think it would be a suicidal move that could open the West to a worldwide war with the Shiites.

I have reported on no other story in my work for the New Yorker since September 11, and, as some of you may have noticed, I have been able to have access – more than most journalists – to some of the inner workings of the Bush Administration. One virtue of being an old timer is that I've had long professional relationship with many senior American intelligence officials and military men – some retired, some still on active duty -- who deal with the White House and the National Security Council. And yet I have no real idea what George Bush knows or believes in. Did he invade Iraq out of a heart-felf belief in the value of Democracy, as he repeatedly has said, or was it because of a calling

stemming from his personal religious Faith, or was it his desire to ensure the safety of Israel, or was it maintain American access to the oil in the Middle East, or did he do it because his father chose not to go to Baghdad and overthrow Saddam Hussein in 1992, at the end of the first Gulf War?

I cannot stand here this evening and tell you that I have an answer, or even a good guess, to that question. Nor do I have any idea whether George Bush is even personally involved in the major decisions that have taken place. Common sense would suggest that of course he is, but my President has given his vice president, Dick Cheney, extraordinary authority – and political clout – that has left all of us guessing. Is today's mess the result of Cheney, or has Bush, with extraordinary cleverness, allowed us to focus on Cheney – as America's Bad Boy – while allowing Bush to cruise above the mess? I just don't know. I recall a very witty bit on television years back, when Ronald Reagan, the former B-movie actor, was President. Reagan was depicted in the skit as seeming to be very much the dunce that many of us thought he was. The scene opened with him meeting in the Oval Office with a group of young students, and making his usual amiable and vague chit chat.. When the students left, a suddenly invigorated Reagan summoned his senior national security aides, walked to the side of his office, pressed a button, and the wall rolled back, revealing a detailed Top Secret map of the Soviet Union. A crisp and precise Reagan, suddenly speaking both English and fluent Russian, began instructing his aides to prepare for a clandestine mission inside Russia.

It was funny then, and very haunting now. Does Bush know what he's done to the Middle East with the invasion of Iraq and his continuing insistence that Democracy must come to all of the nations in the Middle East? Is the chaos we now have the result Bush and his neoconservative aides wanted all along? Chaos certainly seems acceptable to many in the White House. A few years back, the foreign minister of a major American European ally privately told me over lunch that he viewed Paul Wolfowitz, then the deputy secretary of defense, as the perfect Trotskyite, because Wolfowitz clearly was a believer, as was Trotsky, in permanent revolution. (The Foreign Minister later drove me nuts by refusing to let me publish that quote in the New Yorker, even anonymously, because – so he told me – only he was erudite enough to have made such a comparison and, thus, everyone would know it was he who had talked, whether cited by name or not.)

One fact is beyond controversy – President Bush has demolished many of the assumed legislative and constitutional limits on his power and given all of us a primer on how fragile the American Democracy is. None of the institutions meant to protect us from a domineering executive worked. Congress, which was controlled by the Republicans through the first six years of the Bush Presidency,

utterly failed to fulfill its Constitutional role, and failed to provide any oversight of the White House's political and military actions. The senior leadership of the military did not stand up to the President's irrational decision to take the fight against Osama bin Laden to secular Iraq – many senior officers became, in fact, public cheerleaders for the madness of King George. The millions of workers in the federal bureaucracy also were silenced, and chose not to tell what was going on to the relevant Congressional committees or to the press. The failure of the American press corps is most distressing to me, as someone who spent his life believing that it is our job, as journalists, to hold public officials to the highest possible standards. The major newspapers and television networks were cowed by Bush, in the aftermath of 9-11, and thus missed the most important moral issue of the decade – how the President and his minions lied and distorted the intelligence to drive us into the March, 2003, war against Iraq. It wasn't lack of knowledge – I worked for the New York Times in Washington throughout the 1970s – and my former colleagues made it clear in conversations with me that they understood how misleading the White House had been, but such views rarely made it into the pages of the newspaper in 2002 and 2003. I'm not sure how much was self-censorship – reporters being intimidated by the Bush Administration's trumpeted War on Terror – or how much of the failing was the responsibility of the editors. My own guess is that we could fire 90 per cent of the newspaper editors in America and immediately begin producing a better product. A good inside history of the press's role in Bush's ability to rally daily newspaper and television support for the war in Iraq remains to be written, and it must be.

Will there also be a good history of the inner working of the Bush Presidency? I'm not so sure. There is no reason to believe that Bush, or Cheney, have kept careful notes of their decision-making. Such record keeping may be a relic of the more transparent past, anyway. I recall an early morning breakfast I had last year with a U.S. General who had just returned from my extended on-the-scene investigative trip to Afghanistan. His assignment was to produce a report for the one of the leading military men in Washington, and what he found, as he told me, made it clear that the U.S. and its allies were in grave trouble with the Taliban. At some point I asked the General, who I've known for a dozen or so years, when he had time to write his report. "Write a report, Sy?" he responded, with a shrug and raised eyebrows. "Write a report? I put nothing in writing. Just gave it orally." I have a hunch that historians of the future will find a paucity of historically significant documents in the archives of this Administration.

This audience does not need to hear from me about how bad things are inside my country, or about the failures of the major western powers – and I meant most notably Great Britain – to restrain Washington. Germany and France also allowed themselves to be caught up, with England, in the American charade of limited discussions and threatened economic sanctions against Iran over Tehran's suspected nuclear weapons research program. At no time in public did any of our allies insist that that the Bush Administration turn to the most logical solution to the dispute – bilateral talks between Washington and Tehran. Perhaps the most amazing feat of this Presidency has been the ease with which George Bush has managed to escape any significant criticism for his refusal not to talk to those governments he disapproves of. Pretty amazing, when you think about it. The President of the most powerful nation in the world – with the most bombers and the most nuclear weapons – refuses to talk to the leaders of the governments he doesn't like. He doesn't speak to the Iranians, to the Syrians, to Hamas, to Hezbollah, and, for many years, to the North Koreans. And few complain about it.

I have not a clue where all of this will end. Will there be a general war in the Middle East, with the United States and its allies in the West and among the so-called moderate Sunni states of the Middle East – Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf nations – fighting Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and various Shiite factions around the Globe? Will the essential contradiction of the American position in Iraq – we are nominally supporting a government there that is dominated by Shiites allied with Iran, and in a war to the death with many Sunni militias. The American contradiction, becoming clearer with each month, has been to covertly make peace with various Sunni tribes and militias, thus undercutting the Shiite government that was elected and installed in power, with much fanfare in prior years, in what President Bush and minions insist were free and democratic elections. The dilemma in Iraq is ludicrous, deadly and defies a peaceful solution.

So let me stop talking about the obvious, and the obvious solution to the war in Iraq. (I will say that, in my view, there are just two options for ending the war: option A. get everyone out by midnight tonight, and option B, get everyone out by midnight tomorrow.) Let me now talk briefly about the other costs – to my fellow Americans who have been sent to fight this dirty war, as they have been sent to fight other dirty wars. And please understand, I am not dismissing or minimizing the hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians who have been murdered, injured and displaced by the bombs and guns of the insurgents and the Americans. But there also is a cost, not always immediately seen, to those who do the killing and maiming. There are no winners in war – none.

My journalism career has been marked by two significant stories – in the late fall of 1969, as a freelance writer in Washington, I wrote a series of five newspaper articles about an American massacre at a village called My Lai 4 in South Vietnam. I won fame, fortune, glory, and a lot of awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, for those stories. In 2004, I wrote three dispatches in three weeks for the New Yorkers – quite a feat in itself, if anyone here knows about the rigorous checking and editing standards of the magazine – about the torture and abuse on Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the infamous prison of Saddam’s days located a few miles outside of Baghdad. The last of the stories raised questions about who at the top was responsible for the torture – questions that no one in America was ready then – and seemingly now -- to deal with.

I had begun publishing my material on My Lai – where more than five hundred and fifty Vietnamese women, children and old men were slaughtered on the morning of March 16, 1968, by a company of inexperienced American GIs – when I was told the story of Paul Meadlo by one of the soldiers who was there. Meadlo was a seventeen year old farm boy from southern Indiana who had enlisted in the Army, went through basic training, and was then sent with his unit, Charley Company of the Americal Division, to the jungles of South Vietnam at the end of 1967. For the next three months he and his colleagues “humped” – that is, stayed in the rice paddies and jungles of the South looking for Viet Cong. They never ran into the enemy but slowly found themselves being ground up by snipers, booby traps and mines – pretty much as it happens today in Iraq. There’s no enemy in a uniform to fight – just mysterious killers who strike and run, leaving the civilians in the area to suffer the anger and revenge of the Americans. By mid-March of 1968, Charley Company had lost more than a dozen men, without seeing a Viet Cong irregular or North Vietnamese soldier in uniform or engaging in anything close to a firefight. They were told on the evening of March 15 that they would be flown by helicopter to a village – My Lai 4 – early the next morning where intelligence said a battalion of hard core North Vietnamese fighters were located. That night, the kids did what American kids did then – toted a few joints – while the officers and senior enlisted men had their bottles of booze. In the morning they jumped into choppers and roared into the village, ready to kill or be killed. No enemy. Just hundreds of old men, women and children preparing breakfast. Inexplicably, or perhaps it simply was the way it was, the American soldiers gathered the civilians in three large ditches and began to execute them, with fire from their M-1 rifles. Many soldiers did not participate – oh, they fired, but they fired high or wide. Paul Meadlo did what he was told to by his first lieutenant, William Calley (who would emerge as the role model for the massacre, although he was one of many officers on the scene). Meadlo fired clip after clip into the terrified Vietnamese gathered in the ditches,

pausing only to reload. At some point, it got quiet. The Americans took a lunch break amid the slaughter, sitting amidst the dead and eating their K rations. Sometime later, a keening was heard, and a young boy, perhaps two, perhaps three, began crawling his way up from the depths of the ditch, full of others' blood. His mother had somehow shoved him under her body and took the bullets meant for him. He reached the top of the ditch, emitting a cry that no one wanted to ever hear again, and began running away from the Americans. Lieutenant Calley pointed to Meadlo and said, "plug him." But Meadlo, faced with one little boy and not an amorphous mass, could not do it. Calley, with contempt, ran behind the child and shot him with a rifle in the back of his dead. The Strong Man.

On the next morning, Charley company was walking on a patrol near My Lai 4 when Paul Meadlo stepped on a land mine that blew off his right leg to the knee. A helicopter was summoned to evacuate him and, as he and the company waited, Meadlo began exclaiming, over and over again, what amount to a curse aimed at Calley: "God has punished me, Lieutenant Calley, and God will punish you. God has punished me, Lieutenant Calley, and God will punish you." The soldiers all began to urge the helicopter to get there and get him away from them.

I had written the first two stories about My Lai 4 in November, 1969, without hearing a word about Paul Meadlo – by then, a year and a half later, many of the soldiers had finished their Army tour of duty and returned home. It was, I would later conclude, a repressed. Finally, a GI asked me if I'd heard about Meadlo and his destroyed and his curse against Calley. I knew he lived in Indiana and I had one break – Meadlo, M-E-D-L-O, was not a common name. I found Meadlo in a telephone book in Indiana, as I knew I would – after spending many many hours calling information operators at various telephone exchanges throughout the state. His mother picked up the phone. They were still living, it turned out, on their farm near New Goshen, a very rural area near the Ohio River. I told Mrs. Meadlo that I wanted to see her son. She was noncommittal, but did said nothing when I told her I'd be there the next day. I was in Salt Lake City when I made that call, and flew through the night – via Chicago and Indianapolis, Indiana – to get to the farm by mid-day. It was a run down chicken farm – clearly no man was around. The chickens were all over the place and the house itself, a wooden structure, looked precarious. I drove up in my rental car and climbed out. Mrs. Meadlo, who may have been fifty years old but looked much much older, came out to meet me. "I've come to talk to your son," I said. She pointed to the house and said he was there. She said she did not know if he would talk to me, but I was welcome to try. At that moment she hesitated -- and then this uneducated and unsophisticated woman from southern Indiana said to

me, with enormous bitterness – quote – “I gave them a good boy and they sent me back a murderer.”

Flash forward thirty five years. I’ve published the first of my Abu Ghraib stories in the New Yorker and I’m being interviewed on national public radio. It’s a call in show and one of the callers, a woman, tells me that she knows of a child who was in the unit at Abu Ghraib that committed the abuses and no one in the media has been returning her calls about it. On the air, I ask her to get a pencil and paper and then give her my private officer telephone number and tell to call. I figured, correctly, that most people listening to the show were either in their automobile and doing others things and would not get the number. I only got a few random callers over the next days but one of them was the woman. We arranged to meet at a restaurant for lunch at a fast food restaurant, somewhere in northeast American. I, of course, was very eager to talk to any soldier who had been at the Abu Ghraib. At some point during the lunch, when the woman decided she could trust me, she told me the following,. The soldier in question was a female member of the Army Reserves, a weekend warrior who joined the Reserves to get a little extra money for school, clothing or whatever. She was very pretty and had just been married when her unit was mobilized and sent to Iraq a few months after the war began in 2003. She and her fellow soldiers were trained primarily as military policemen, MPs as we call it, whose main skill was in directing traffic. Once in Iraq, however, they were eventually assigned as prison guards at Abu Ghraib and quickly got involved – this was in the early fall of 2003 -- in the fun and games that took place there. You’ve all seen photos and read stories, I assume, telling what I’m talking about. In early January of 2004, one of the soldiers in the MP unit went to the authorities with a CD depicting the horrific things that were taking place and everything came to a standstill. The young soldier, who was not directly involved in the torture, was returned home with her unit a few months later, in March of 2004. No outsider knew anything about Abu Ghraib or the internal Army investigation that was then under way. The young soldier returned as a different person, I was told. She was sullen, withdrawn, depressed. She did not want to talk to her family or engage with them in any meaningful way and, in fact, left her husband and moved to a nearby city. In late April, when the first Abu Ghraib stories and photographs were published, the woman went to see the child. (I’m purposely being vagued about their relationship.) She showed her a headline and asked if that was the reason for her behavior. The door, essentially, was slammed. The young soldier did not want to talk about it.

At this point, the woman recalled that she had provided the child with a portable computer with a DVD player installed in it before she left for Iraq. I subsequently learned that almost every GI assigned to Iraq arrived with a

personal DVD player or computer, since there were few other options for off-duty relaxation in muslim Iraq. The computer was left in the woman's home when the young reservists returned from Iraq and had not been touched since. At this point, the woman had telephoned me decided that she needed a second computer at her office and thus, she told me, she opened it and begin deleting files. The woman, who knows nothing of Freud, insisted that her decision to go through the computer had nothing to do with what was in the newspaper. I still tease her about the unconscious. In any event, one of the files was marked "Iraq" and the woman opened. Out popped a series of photographs that no family member should ever see. There were perhaps sixty digital photographs of a naked Iraqi prisoner being confronted with two snarling Belgium shepherd less than three feet away. She was standing in front of prison bars, hands between his head – he could not even use his hands to protect his privates, as every instinct in his body deemed he must do. The photographs show that one of the dogs eventually bit the prisoners in a sensitive spot and there were scenes of blood – pools of blood, in fact – and eventually one could see a soldier trying to sew his wound with needle and thread. I was given those photographs by the woman, with no fee – the New Yorker of course could not pay, but others would have paid dearly for them. The editor, David Remnick, decided, very wisely, I now believe, to only publish one iconic photo of the prisoners standing, arms behind his head, in front of the frothing dogs. The photograph was reprinted around the world.

I stayed in touch with the woman over the next year or so, and did immediately urge her to get some immediate help for the young soldiers, who seemed to be in crisis. Such issues are complicated for a journalist, because I also needed the woman to get permission from the soldier to let me publish the photographs, and I needed that decision to be made independent of any intervention by me. If it sounds complicated, it is. In any case, perhaps a year later I and the woman were having dinner, or perhaps it was just over the telephone, but I was told something I had not known at the time. The young soldier, after leaving her home and friends, and husband, after her return from Iraq, had also begun getting tattoos on her body every weekend. Eventually, I was told, she had filled her body up to her neck with large black and blue tattoos. It was as if, the woman said to me, "She wanted to change her skin."

We in America are only beginning today to understand the social and emotional costs of our soldiders' involvement in Iraq. We will understand more over the next few decades.

Washington, D.C., August 3, 2007