

A Roman once observed that dying for your country can be "sweet." The bill-of-goods became part of our Western culture, still honored in politicians' speeches. It has no valid place in this democracy. For proof, look at the tears of joy on the faces of the returning Desert Storm vets and their families.

What made the Persian Gulf expedition truly sweet for all Americans was the low U.S. casualty count. Less than 120 fell in battle. Another 200 died in non-combat incidents, some as far away as the Philippines. I have seen no figures on wounded and maimed.

An unnamed defense department statistician estimated that had there been no war more of the 500,000 Desert Storm personnel would have been lost to traffic accidents. He cited Saudi Arabia's ban on alcohol as actually having saved American lives and limbs during the seven-month operation. Of course, in all probability, they would have been different lives.

Every war's greatest tragedy comes from its harvest of the nation's best and brightest, as well as most courageous. We can no longer say young men. For the first time American women shed their blood, performing combat-related functions.

Of course, everyone's fears for Delaware hangers lined with new body bags rested on U.S. intelligence reports about the Iraqi army's numbers, fortifications and weaponry, including chemical and biological capabilities.

As it turned out, none of Saddam Hussein's legions was ever fully manned. His eight-year war with Iran left the ranks riddled. His "world's fourth largest army" existed only in propaganda, his and ours.

We now know that desertions began last August with the arrival of the 82nd Airborne; they turned into a flood when the first bombing attacks began the blood-letting. By the time the alliance ground offensive rolled underway, even divisions of the vaunted Republican Guard could muster no more than half-strength.

As with its "mighty horde," Iraq's capability of wreaking chemical and biological vengeance proved a figment. Allied troops found evidence of neither terror weaponry. Nor were they met with flaming ditches or any of the other complicated defenses developed against Iran. Sophisticated bunkers turned out, for the most part, little more than glorified foxholes.

Establishing the enemy's weakness takes nothing away from the resounding triumph scored by America's brave men and women. After all, while our top commanders, especially the president, may have understood the debilitated enemy

they faced, the front-line soldiers and Marines moved out not knowing what to expect; their courage geared to take on Iraq's publicized "million-strong" army.

While I bow to no one in my respect for those young Americans' accomplishments, the post-combat revelations of the truth behind Mr. Hussein's boasting strengthens my convictions that this was an unnecessary war, with less moral justification than Vietnam.

In Southeast Asia the United States attempted to protect men, women and children from the degradation and enslavement threatened by hostile conquest. We failed in means, not intent. The war was lost when we started destroying villages and killing innocents, in order to "save" them.

George Bush liked to compare Mr. Hussein to Hitler. At best, it was an overblown tribute. At his worst, Baghdad's dictator was nothing more than one more Middle East warlord, whose bubble reputation for fighting Iran's greater millions to a standstill was gained with the world's support, including Washington's.

Mr. Bush showed he had learned World War II's lessons, by dispatching paratroops to the Kuwaiti border before the dust settled behind Iraq's invasion. At that point, the looting was small stuff; plundering received official discouragement from Baghdad's regime which still meant to milk the emirate, as its "19th province."

Negotiating Mr. Hussein out of Kuwait, by whatever means and maybe Moscow's help, might have saved the dictator's face, but only temporarily. He would have wound up the loser, no hero to anyone; his days numbered, awaiting the loser's destiny.

In any event, Kuwait would have been protected from savage ravishing. Its oil fields and the Persian Gulf did not become ecological disasters until after the bombings got under way. Who will now restore Iraq's broken homes and splattered facilities? Another large slice of the Middle East could have been spared Lebanon's desolation at the bargaining table.

While I cheer the feats of our men (and women) at arms, I will not join the celebration for Mr. Bush's "famous" victory. The comfort that comes with knowing so few young Americans lost their lives is overwhelmed in my soul by contemplating other human beings' uncounted dead children — more innocents slaughtered in the clash of ambition and personalities.

And the dying has not ceased. The Middle East cycle holds sway: killing begets killing begets killing begets...

