

Today's headlines recall yesterday's 'quick' war

By James B. Stockdale II

When we last tuned in a television war, it was through all-seeing infrared lenses on pinpoint-accuracy cameras. Enthralled with the close-up capacity of our military force, we were fascinated by being so modern — invincible in a far-away land. We've kept this movie in our heads and, driven by those pictures and the adrenaline of power, we rattle sabers yet again at the depiction of evil.

Our goal is to eliminate weapons of mass destruction. Who will argue? We want a rematch, we think. We are not sure — but we want to feel that way again.

Just a minute. Do we think Saddam Hussein has not learned anything? I suspect not. He, like Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh, is a student of American shallowness. Our own analysts have said that we can't accomplish this mission with our air strikes alone. That means ground troops. And it means his turf and terms against our technology and spectator resolve.

The last time we believed this deeply in our invincibility was not 1990 in the Persian Gulf. It was 1964 in the Gulf of Tonkin. In August of that year, my dad was the commanding combat pilot in the air during the so-called PT boat provocation that led to a long war. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's men were sent to get the firsthand testimony President Lyndon Johnson needed for an executive order to commit troops.

When Dad and his wingman stuck by the truth — that there were no boats harassing American destroyers on the night in question — the government went with a fictionalized version of events. Officials did it because they were so sure they were right about what was needed and how quickly victory would be ours. An entire generation of Americans was left holding the bag.

Within months of that conversation, I opened our front door one evening to a Navy chaplain and my mom's best friend. Dad was missing in action, with no radio contact and no visual sighting. I was 14, and my three younger brothers and I wondered with our mother if Dad would come home or how long he'd be gone. After all

(we reasoned) our leaders certainly had some fix on how soon this war could be brought to an end. We had the technological advantage, and we were so convinced we were right.

Almost exactly 25 years ago, I stood one last time on the runway tarmac. This had been Dad's workplace. Mom and I stood arm-in-arm awaiting his arrival from Hanoi after 7½ years. My brothers flanked us in the sunlight, and the band struck up as the plane touched down. The door opened, and then a gaunt frame appeared.

He'd spent four prison years in solitary confinement and leg irons in a dark cell. He'd endured repeated torture and was branded by his captors as "the blackest of criminals." But Ho Chi Minh knew the enemy — and his words had come down through the system: "At the negotiating table, American pilots are worth their weight in gold." So most were kept alive.

He looked over at us, smiled and waved before finding the rail with both hands and limping down the steps. His uniform hung loosely as he proudly approached the microphone. I gave him thumbs up and hung on to Mom as she applauded. He quoted the stoic, "For the soldier who returns from battle, nothing sounds so sweet as the raindrops on the rooftops of home."

And then, finally, we were together again.

In the years since that day, I have marveled at one family's lyric passage. Freedom is hard won and deserves to be cherished. The years since learning that lesson have not muted its intensity. So I offer this caution as our diplomats cheerlead us into yet another conflict with "no alternative." Reckon yourselves to these real costs and take some measure of our honest commitment before we once again pull our massive carriers into the wind and launch pilots we are so sure will be home soon.

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