

MARY MCGRORY

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IF YOU will excuse me, I think I will skip the June 8 parade. And although I love bands and I am glad the troops are safely back, I may not make the July 4 "mother of all homecoming parades" either.

I know Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf himself is going to march down Pennsylvania Avenue, but I think I'll wait until another general, a smaller, quieter man than Schwarzkopf, comes back. His name is Maj. Gen. Jay Garner. He's over on the Iraq-Turkish border, cleaning up the mess.

He's coping with Kurds, and he doesn't talk in the grand manner of H. Norman or make reporters laugh or cry. I know that by waiting for him, I'll miss the re-creation, in fireworks, of the bombing of Baghdad, but I didn't like the show much the first time I saw it, so I'm pretty sure the replay is not for me.

Garner comes on television looking harassed, and no wonder. He's hunkered down over there, doing a hundred things at once, organizing international hospital teams, putting up tents, dicker with Kurdish leaders, sweeping the streets of his refugee city clear of menacing Iraqi thugs.

He has Green Berets helping old ladies across rivers and handling babies to safety. His troops toss little Kurdish

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boys high in the air and make them laugh.

On "Nightline" recently, the general said modestly to Forrest Sawyer, "I think you'd be proud of what's happened."

You bet we are, general. America is good at bombing. America dashed across the desert and encircled the fourth largest army in the world. But there's another America too that's on view now. That's the country that can handle any crisis, solve any problem, move mountains, get people back on their feet.

I saw a T-shirt in Murphy's the other day. It said, "U.S.A. Kicks Butt."

That's true, but I'm glad the world is seeing that we do the opposite just as well. Having done the "Highway of Death," we're now doing the highway to life, and it looks much better.

President Bush, who tries to pretend that the refugees are the victims of a natural disaster, wants all the troops home by the Fourth of July, in time for the big parade. But some of the service men and women, caught up in the plight of the liquid-eyed people they are helping, say they

wouldn't mind staying. They say things like, "This is the most important thing I've ever done."

Will the Kurds be left in the lurch? Will we step back and leave them to the genocidal whims of Saddam Hussein? He betrayed them and gassed them before, and he could do it again. The president, having bombed Iraq back to the pre-industrial age and encouraged its people to rise up, now says he doesn't want to get involved.

Gen. Colin Powell couldn't have foreseen it in detail, but maybe it was a foreboding of something of the kind that he had in mind when he told the president last January that he favored continuing the economic sanctions over the use of military force.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the same time apparently decided that if Bush's decision went the other way, he would salute smartly and lead the war effort.

We learn this from Bob Woodward's new book, "The Commanders," an inside look at the Pentagon elite.

The revelations about Powell's dissent could cause political tremors. We cannot be sure that the Democrats who voted against the war in January will at

last rise from their knees and regroup behind his strong figure.

The fact is that they cannot seem to assert themselves about anything. The Brady bill, a modest anti-gun measure, is in trouble because they cower before the NRA. They could take shelter with two conservative Republicans, Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon, both of whom have endorsed Brady. What more is there in the way of protection? But they have lost their nerve along with their identity.

Powell's heresy could have a dampening effect on the flaming rhetoric of militant inquisitors like Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.), who have charged the Democrats with treason and/or cowardice for their anti-war votes. They might not wish to hurt such epithets at the chairman, a combat veteran whom some Republicans just lately talked about as a perfect vice-presidential candidate. Now the purists may question his right to be on the parade reviewing stand.

Maybe Powell would like to wait with those of us who are going to hold off our flag-waving until our hero, Gen. Garner, gets here. We know he's one of us. As I say, we're in no hurry. We don't think Garner is, either.