



Alliance Against Conformity

Bund gegen Anpassung

Hold on to your humanity: An open letter to GIs in Iraq

By Stan Goff (US Army Retired), CounterPunch

Dear American serviceperson in Iraq,

I am a retired veteran of the army, and my own son is among you, a paratrooper like I was. The changes that are happening to every one of you – some more extreme than others – are changes I know very well. So I'm going to say some things to you straight up in the language to which you are accustomed.

In 1970, I was assigned to the 173rd Airborne Brigade, then based in northern Binh Dinh Province in what was then the Republic of Vietnam. When I went there, I had my head full of shit: shit from the news media, shit from movies, shit about what it supposedly mean to be a man, and shit from a lot of my know-nothing neighbors who would tell you plenty about Vietnam even though they'd never been there, or to war at all.

The essence of all this shit was that we had to »stay the course in Vietnam,« and that we were on some mission to save good Vietnamese from bad Vietnamese, and to keep the bad Vietnamese from hitting beachheads outside of Oakland. We stayed the course until 58,000 Americans were dead and lots more maimed for life, and 3,000,000 Southeast Asians were dead. Ex-military people and even many on active duty played a big part in finally bringing that crime to a halt.

When I started hearing about weapons of mass destruction that threatened the United States from Iraq, a shattered country that had endured almost a decade of trench war followed by an invasion and twelve years of sanctions, my first question was how in the hell can anyone believe that this suffering country presents a threat to the United States? But then I remembered how many people had believed Vietnam threatened the United States. Including me.

When that bullshit story about weapons came apart like a two-dollar shirt, the politicians who cooked up this war told everyone, including you, that you would be greeted like great liberators. They told us that we were in Vietnam to make sure everyone there could vote.

What they didn't tell me was that before I got there in 1970, the American armed forces had been burning villages, killing livestock, poisoning farmlands and forests, killing civilians for sport, bombing whole villages, and committing rapes and massacres, and the people who were grieving and raging over that weren't in a position to figure out the difference between me – just in country – and the people who had done those things to them.

What they didn't tell you is that over a million and a half Iraqis died between 1991 and 2003 from malnutrition, medical neglect, and bad sanitation. Over half a million of those who died were the

weakest: the children, especially very young children.

My son who is over there now has a baby. We visit with our grandson every chance we get. He is eleven months old now. Lots of you have children, so you know how easy it is to really love them, and love them so hard you just know your entire world would collapse if anything happened to them. Iraqis feel that way about their babies, too. And they are not going to forget that the United States government was largely responsible for the deaths of half a million kids.

So the lie that you would be welcomed as liberators was just that. A lie. A lie for people in the United States to get them to open their purse for this obscenity, and a lie for you to pump you up for a fight.

And when you put this into perspective, you know that if you were an Iraqi, you probably wouldn't be crazy about American soldiers taking over your towns and cities either. This is the tough reality I faced in Vietnam. I knew while I was there that if I were Vietnamese, I would have been one of the Vietcong.

But there we were, ordered into someone else's country, playing the role of occupier when we didn't know the people, their language, or their culture, with our head full of bullshit our so-called leaders had told us during training and in preparation for deployment, and even when we got there. There we were, facing people we were ordered to dominate, but any one of whom might be pumping mortars at us or firing AKs at us later that night. The question we stated to ask is who put us in this position?

In our process of fighting to stay alive, and in their process of trying to expel an invader that violated their dignity, destroyed their property, and killed their innocents, we were faced off against each other by people who made these decisions in \$5,000 suits, who laughed and slapped each other on the back in Washington DC with their fat fucking asses stuffed full of cordon blue and caviar.

They chumped us. Anyone can be chumped.

That's you now. Just fewer trees and less water.

We haven't figured out how to stop the pasty-faced, oil-hungry backslappers in DC yet, and it looks like you all might be stuck there for a little longer. So I want to tell you the rest of the story.

I changed over there in Vietnam and they were not nice changes either. I started getting pulled into something – something that craved other people's pain. Just to make sure I wasn't regarded as a »fucking missionary« or a possible rat, I learned how to fit myself into that group that was untouchable, people too crazy to fuck with, people who desired the rush of omnipotence that comes with setting someone's house on fire just for the pure hell of it, or who could kill anyone, man, woman, or child, with hardly a second thought. People who had the power of life and death – because they could.

The anger helps. It's easy to hate everyone you can't trust because of your circumstances, and to rage about what you've seen, what has happened to you, and what you have done and can't take back.

It was all an act for me, a cover-up for deeper fears I couldn't name, and the reason I know that is that we had to dehumanize our victims before we did the things we did. We knew deep down that what we were doing was wrong. So they became dinks or gooks, just like Iraqis are now being transformed into ragheads or hajjis. People had to be reduced to »niggers« here before they could be lynched. No difference. We convinced ourselves we had to kill them to survive, even when that wasn't true, but something inside us told us that so long as they were human beings, with the same intrinsic value we had as human beings, we were not allowed to burn their homes and barns, kill their animals, and sometimes even kill them. So we used these words, these new names, to reduce them, to strip them of their essential humanity, and then we could do things like adjust artillery fire onto the cries of a baby.

Until that baby was silenced, though, and here's the important thing to understand, that baby never surrendered her humanity. I did. We did. That's the thing you might not get until it's too late. When you take away the humanity of another, you kill your own humanity. You attack your own soul because it is standing in the way.

So we finish our tour, and go back to our families, who can see that even though we function, we are empty and incapable of truly connecting to people any more, and maybe we can go for months or even years before we fill that void where we surrendered our humanity, with chemical anesthetics – drugs, alcohol, until we realize that the void can never be filled and we shoot ourselves, or head off into the street where we can disappear with the flotsam of society, or we hurt others, especially those who try to love us, and end up as another incarceration statistic or a mental patient.

You can never escape that you became a racist because you made the excuse that you needed that to survive, that you took things away from people that you can never give back, or that you killed a piece of yourself that you may never get back.

Some of us do. We get lucky and someone gives a damn enough to emotionally resuscitate us and bring us back to life. Many do not.

I live with the rage every day of my life, even when no one else sees it. You might hear it in my words. I hate being chumped.

So here is my message to you. You will do what you have to do to survive, however you define survival, while we do what we have to do to stop this thing. But don't surrender your humanity. Not to fit in. Not to prove yourself. Not for an adrenaline rush. Not to lash out when you are angry and frustrated. Not for some ticket-punching fucking military careerist to make his bones on. Especially not for the Bush-Cheney Gas & Oil Consortium.

The big bosses are trying to gain control of the world's energy supplies to twist the arms of future economic competitors. That's what's going on, and you need to understand it, then do what you need to do to hold on to your humanity. The system does that; tells you you are some kind of hero action figures, but uses you as gunmen. They chump you.

Your so-called civilian leadership sees you as an expendable commodity. They don't care about your nightmares, about the DU that you are breathing, about the loneliness, the doubts, the pain, or about how your humanity is stripped away a piece at a time. They will cut your benefits, deny your illnesses, and hide your wounded and dead from the public. They already are.

They don't care. So you have to. And to preserve your own humanity, you must recognize the humanity of the people whose nation you now occupy and know that both you and they are victims of the filthy rich bastards who are calling the shots.

They are your enemies – The Suits – and they are the enemies of peace, and the enemies of your families, especially if they are Black families, or immigrant families, or poor families. They are thieves and bullies who take and never give, and they say they will »never run« in Iraq, but you and I know that they will never have to run, because they fucking aren't there. You are

They'll skin and grin while they are getting what they want from you, and throw you away like a used condom when they are done. Ask the vets who are having their benefits slashed out from under them now. Bushfeld and their cronies are parasites, and they are the sole beneficiaries of the chaos you are learning to live in. They get the money. You get the prosthetic devices, the nightmares, and the mysterious illnesses.

So if your rage needs a target, there they are, responsible for your being there, and responsible for keeping you there. I can't tell you to disobey. That would probably run me afoul of the law. That will be a decision you will have to take when and if the circumstances and your own conscience dictate. But it perfectly legal for you to refuse illegal orders, and orders to abuse or attack civilians are

illegal. Ordering you to keep silent about these crimes is also illegal.

I can tell you, without fear of legal consequence, that you are never under any obligation to hate Iraqis, you are never under any obligation to give yourself over to racism and nihilism and the thirst to kill for the sake of killing, and you are never under any obligation to let them drive out the last vestiges of your capacity to see and tell the truth to yourself and to the world. You do not owe them your souls.

Come home safe, and come home sane. The people who love you and who have loved you all your lives are waiting here, and we want you to come back and be able to look us in the face. Don't leave your souls in the dust there like another corpse.

Hold on to your humanity.

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