

# The Weight Of What-If

**I**N THE SUMMER OF 1971 I STOOD AT THE WIRE ticker and watched as my college boyfriend's lottery draft number came up 365. Only his cousin, born in a leap year, did better. It made it a certainty that neither would have to serve in Vietnam. Every once in a while I've flashed back to that roll of the dice, as the college student morphed into the attorney, the boyfriend into the

husband and later the father. It could have been a different future, for him, for me, for the three kids who might never have existed, if he'd wound up in the single digits.

From the snug harbor of their settled lives, people like to torture themselves a little with the specter of what-ifs, which is why so many still watch "It's a Wonderful Life" every year at Christmastime. A different school, a different job, a different town, a different choice. One brick out of the wall, and the whole thing tumbles. The randomness of life is disconcerting.

But there's nothing quite like a protracted war to shift the landscape of existence wholesale. Stand in front of any war memorial or military cemetery, in a small town, in the capital, in Gettysburg, in France, and the what-ifs are heavy in the air. The marriages precipitously ended or never made. The children orphaned or never born. The families broken, the towns denuded. On a visit to Moscow years ago I was struck by the absence of men of a certain age. Then someone reminded me that some estimates had 13 percent of the Soviet population, mostly male, killed in World War II.

Amid the strategy, the cost, the risk, the politics, do policymakers remember that when they start a war it is as if they dragged heavy hands across the map of the world and altered the details of daily life? Every name on the sloping black wall of the Vietnam Memorial tells a story. It is a collection of short stories, of might-have-beens, a book with half the pages gone.

The war in Iraq is taking place in an atmosphere noticeably different from that of past conflicts. The age of the dictum has morphed into the age of the discussion, and dissent is no longer synonymous with treason. That makes it harder for politi-

cians to keep people in line. It's difficult to imagine the men who fought in World War II questioning the mission, or lining up to seek psychiatric help afterward. Yet in documentaries today you can watch some of those men, now barely recognizable as the young soldiers in archival photos, recall comrades 60 years dead and see their faces work painfully, fruitlessly, before they begin to weep. Like soldiers everywhere, they were irrevocably changed. But they came home at a time when the pretense was that they could magically be the same, that everything

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could get back to normal. No one believes that anymore.

Those World War II veterans represent the thesis in a dialectic of modern attitudes toward warfare. The mission and the men then were both accepted as honorable and good; the cost was counted in gold stars, not black marks. The antithesis was Vietnam; when Americans soured on the war they, too, often soured on the soldiers fighting it, so that when those men came home, with the same terrible nightmares as their predecessors, they felt obliged to keep their heads down instead of holding them high.

Iraq is the synthesis. More than half of all Americans feel that this war was a

miscalculation, yet they will still stop in airports or on the street to shake the hands of those in uniform and thank them for their service. But you can't expect people who are invested in the valor of those young men and women to be reconciled to a premature end to their lives. War is the stuff of political analysis, but the troops are a human-interest story. For many, people trump policy.

The rationale for going to war has to meet many tests, but one of them—perhaps the most important one—is whether the mission is strong enough to carry the weight of so many ghosts and so much misery, here and in Iraq, too. The grieving spouses raising children alone, the broken parents who wake each morning to a gray day. The amputees swinging down the street on prosthetics, the addicts who still hear IEDs exploding in their heads. The legacy of what-ifs, of abbreviated and amended lives.

Maybe any conflict will topple under such a burden. Maybe the spectacle of hometown kids' leaving home to be killed or maimed is bearable only when it's given a more antiseptic name: troop strength, casualties, something less human. That most macho of American novelists, Ernest Hemingway, reflects that in "A Farewell to Arms" when an Italian soldier talks about how sick he is of the whole thing. "There is nothing worse than war," he says, adding, "What is defeat? You go home ... One side must stop fighting. Why don't we stop fighting?"

Or perhaps it is another Hemingway quote that is more apt, seeing the black bunting over the firehouse in an American town or Iraqi mourners gathered around a child's grave: "The world breaks everyone, and afterwards, many are strong at the broken places."



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES GAY, NYNY; TOP: NEWSWEEK



**A firefighter who lost his son in Vietnam said:**

I'm bitter. You bet your goddamn dollar I'm bitter. It's people like us who give up our sons for the country. The business people, they run the country and make money from it. The college types, the professors, they go to Washington and tell the government what to do.... But their sons, they don't end up in the swamps over there, in Vietnam. No sir. They're deferred, because they're in school. Or they get sent to safe places. Or they get out with all those letters they have from their doctors. Ralph told me. He told me what went on at his physical. He said most of the kids were from average homes; and the few rich kids there were, they all had big-deal letters saying they weren't eligible.... Let's face it: if you have a lot of money, or if you have the right connections, you don't end up on a firing line in the jungle over there, not unless you *want* to. Ralph had no choice. He didn't want to die. He wanted to live. They just took him- to "defend democracy," that's what they keep on saying. Hell, I wonder.

I think we ought to win that war or pull out. What the hell else should we do-sit and bleed ourselves to death, year after year? I hate those peace demonstrators. Why don't they go to Vietnam and demonstrate in front of the North Vietnamese?...The whole thing is a mess. The sooner we get the hell out of there the better. But what bothers me about the peace crowd is that you can tell from their attitude, the way they look and what they say, that they don't really love this Country. Some of them almost seem glad to have a chance to criticize us.... To hell with them! My son didn't die so they can look filthy and talk filthy and insult everything we believe in and everyone in the country- me and my wife and people here on the street, and the next street, and all over. Pg. 42

**The firefighter's wife said:**

I told him I thought they want the war to end, so no more Ralphs will die, but he says no, they never stop and think about Ralph and his kind of people, and I'm inclined to agree. They *say* they do, but I listen to them, I watch them; since Ralph died I listen and I watch as carefully as I can. Their hearts with other people, not their own American people, the ordinary kind of person in this country....Those people, a lot of them are rich women from the suburbs, the rich suburbs. Those kids, they are in college....I'm against this war, too-the way another is, whose sons are in the army, who has lost a son fighting in it. The world doesn't hear me, and it doesn't hear a single person I know. Pg. 43

In 1964, his brother (a helicopter pilot in Vietnam) was shot down and killed. He was in high school when his brother was killed. He dropped out to enlist, fully intending to go to Vietnam to avenge the loss of his brother. He grew up in a small working-class suburb on Long Island, New York.

Our little town had a Legion Post and a VFW Post and a DAV [Disabled American Veterans] Post and this kind of post and that kind of post. We were just swamped with it all, our adolescent years. My father was in the service with all his brothers. His father and all his uncles were in the service. I kind of grew up around older fellows. My father and his peer group talked about World War II and Korea and how "this one was there" and "that one was there" and [pause] it was the right thing to do.

There wasn't any question as to whether you were going to do it or not. It's part of life. There'd be something wrong with you if you didn't go in.