

# OPINION

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press. ...”

— The First Amendment

## Messengers of darkness

In the Santa Cruz Sentinel on Tuesday, April 13, there was a picture to make any American wince: a U.S. Marine swinging an ax to knock in the door of a

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private home in Fallujah, Iraq. It was sickening to see the image, but the caption told

a terrible story: “U.S. Marines knock in a door while conducting a house-to-house search for weapons in Fallujah.” This meant that Marines were systematically, one by one, hacking in the doors of anonymous, private Iraqi homes.

Just imagine for a moment that this is your door, your home. Now imagine that you are the young Marine given the order to break this door down. Both people, the Marine and the family inside, are in an outrageously untenable situation. Neither will heal easily from this violence.

I have looked at this picture for many days now. In it there is a grim and determined set to the Marine's face. It reminds me of an interview with a U.S. soldier on National Public Radio a few weeks ago. The soldier was the leader of house-to-house searches in Baghdad for insurgents. Our own Marines were knocking down doors and ransacking houses — any house that stood in the wrong neighborhood or street — while grandmothers stood by courageously defending the family's goods. The Marine grunted to the NPR reporter and said something like, *Man, I mean, if some people came into my country and did this to my home? I'd kill them.* A long silence. *But I guess it's what we have to do.*

Bombs, guns and Marines with axes at private doors is what our military meant when they said the U.S. response to the mob violence in Fallujah would be swift, effective and overwhelming. Perhaps it was swift and overwhelming. But it has hardly been effective. There has been condemnation from within and outside Iraq against

the U.S. policy of collective punishment of innocent people.

How would you feel if any occupying army broke down your door and ransacked your home? How would you feel if — as Cox News Service reported recently of innocent Iraqi civilians — 8,000 to 10,000 innocent Americans were dead through the actions of an occupying army? If up to 6,000 American soldiers had died in the past year, as have 6,000 Iraqi people dead and mourned by loved ones. How would you feel?

Underneath the picture of the Marine with the ax was another article. Its headline: “Family prays only one daughter will die in Iraq.” Put yourself in that picture and know what your tax dollars are doing. As of the last reported count, more than 700 U.S. troops have died in Iraq. The United Press International reports that 12,000 American soldiers have been evacuated from Iraq due to serious wounds or maiming. The equivalent of more than two brigades of soldiers. These valiant people return without legs or arms, with broken backs or nervous disorders. They develop chronic unsightly, difficult chronic ailments. Even for those who follow the news, they are essentially invisible. And all these numbers are daily rising.

On Feb. 15, 2003, 11 million people marched through streets across the planet in opposition to this war. It was probably the largest gathering for a single, common cause in the history of humanity. According to CNN, there were 1 million men, women and children in London and another 1 million in Rome. There were 2 million in Spain, including more than 1 million in Barcelona and 600,000 in Madrid. There were half a million in Berlin and 300,000 in France. There were 200,000 in New York City, 80,000 in San Francisco. And on and on, from Australia to Antarctica, people gathered in protest.

Those of us who marched that



The Associated Press

This photo depicting U.S. Marines using an ax to break into homes in Fallujah ran in the Sentinel on April 13.

Feb. 15 are not surprised at the gut-wrenching turn of events in Iraq. We were not astonished when it was recently announced that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction. In the weeks leading up to the March 2003 invasion, Hans Blix, the U.N. chief weapons inspector, said it was a matter of “weeks, not months,” before he was able to conclude his search for WMDs.

*Weeks, not months.* Did anyone really believe that in those weeks, while the U.N. finished its process, with swarms of U.N. personnel all throughout Iraq, that somehow the Iraqi government was going to launch an attack against the U.S.? Yet President Bush spoke of an “urgent” threat that was so strong the country could not wait a few weeks for inspections to be concluded before going to war.

And we are not surprised that the American invasion of Iraq has fanned the flames of terrorism everywhere. The U.S. has invaded an Arab Muslim country. The place continues to be violently unstable. It is commonplace to read that anti-U.S. sentiment worldwide has soared to a new and dangerous level. The latest report released from the CIA, according to the Washington Post, is that al-Qaida is less of a threat due to traditional anti-terrorism work. But cells of new, loosely organized terrorists are cropping up daily all over the world, and our country will face this threat for the next generation. Our government did the equivalent of tossing a proverbial match along a haphazard line of gasoline. It's all in flames now.

Imagine for a moment a slightly alternate reality. In March 2003, the U.S. government waits a few weeks for Hans Blix

and the U.N. inspection team to complete their inspections. In late April, the U.N. makes a finding of no weapons of mass destruction. There is no war in Iraq. Twelve thousand American men and women soldiers are not wounded or maimed there. More than 700 do not die. Sixteen thousand Iraqis do not die. President Bush attends no military funerals, because there are none to attend. There is no impending, years-long Iraqi quagmire. We Americans still feel worried about terrorism, but perhaps the news is even good. Al-Qaida is weaker, due to traditional anti-terrorism efforts that have continued to today. No American contractors hang charred from a bridge. New terrorists do not have an American invasion of a Muslim country to use as a recruitment tool. No young American soldiers spend their days knocking down doors in Iraq. As a country, we have our soul.

It is possible to get it back. But in order to do that, we have to be willing to look at the pictures. Many Americans tune out the great ugliness of this war. Yet when ordinary people do not pay attention, we lose our country's only hope of recovery. We must look, and look closely, and speak out to those in power. How many innocent Iraqi deaths from our government's actions are too many? How many innocent homes stormed by Marines? And we must ask what that young Marine with the ax deserves from us — we who pay his bills, and who elect those who sent him, like a dark messenger, through that fragile door.

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