

# Soldiers and Citizens

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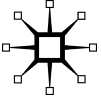
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# Soldiers and Citizens

An Oral History of Operation Iraqi  
Freedom from the Battlefield to  
the Pentagon

Carl Mirra

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with Iraqi army soldiers from 1st Battalion, 2nd Brigade, 4th Iraqi Army  
Division in Al Muradia village, Iraq, March, 13, 2007. U.S. Air Force  
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*To  
The Iraqi People,  
soldiers and veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom  
and their families*

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## Series Editors' Foreword

The 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the crash of United Flight 93 in a Pennsylvania field set off a series of responses felt around the globe. Not the least of which was America's invasion of Iraq and the toppling of its long-time leader, Saddam Hussein. Originally supported by a large segment of the U.S. population and premised on Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, in the eyes of many Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) eventually transformed into a controversial and unpopular American imperial adventure. Carl Mirra's *Soldiers and Citizens* provides a gripping oral history of all parties to this event. His interviews include dissident veterans, pro-victory soldiers, affected families, and policy-makers. In so doing, he achieves his goal of developing a dialogue among all points of view.

This is not an easy task for the oral historian, who has a definite perspective about the subject under scrutiny. Yet a good interviewer ordinarily will permit the interviewee to tell his or her story without trying to bias the result. Here, the author has subordinated his point of view in the service of scholarship and employed oral history to achieve a dialogue across differences. In the words of scholar Andrew J. Bacevich, whose interview appears in chapter five, "I don't care if you tell me you are on the Left or the Right, what I care about is what you have to say. I am eager to hear all points of view." This is a good strategy for the oral historian, who has a responsibility to the reader to provide a reasoned narrative. Although this study began as a project of Historians against the War, it transcends any one perspective. Nevertheless, the oral histories collected herein should greatly contribute to historians and the public's assessment of OIF and the Bush administration's approach to foreign policy.

This volume, then, adds another important subject to the Palgrave Macmillan *Studies in Oral History* series, which already has discussed significant topics such as the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Japanese

internment, Argentina's "disappeared," and the struggle for civil rights in the United States. With more volumes to come, the series strives to bring the best in oral history to a wide readership. In so doing, we hope to give life to history in the words of those ordinary and extraordinary people who live it and make it.

BRUCE M. STAVE  
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## Foreword by Christian Appy

Five years and counting, the Iraq War has already become the second-longest major U.S. military engagement since Independence. Only the Vietnam War still trumps it in sheer, will-it-ever-end persistence, and in both cases U.S. intervention continued years beyond the point when a majority of Americans concluded that their government had taken them into a war they should never have fought. In terms of the human cost, you would have to be what C. Wright Mills called a “crackpot realist” to find solace in the fact that the current death toll of about 4,000 Americans and nearly a million Iraqis is still below the nearly 60,000 Americans and 3 million Vietnamese killed in “America’s longest war.” As for the dollar cost—the bottom line supposedly honored by all realists (crackpot or not)—the current war has raced past its Asian predecessor, well beyond a trillion and climbing.

What a lot of history we have endured since 9/11. We need to remind ourselves how little of it our children can be expected to know or recall. Most high school students today have, at best, only the dimmest memory of those prewar months in 2002 when the Bush administration, with unbridled and unequivocal certitude, declared that Saddam Hussein possessed a huge stockpile of weapons of mass destruction posing a dire and imminent threat to us all. Barely aware of the original rationale for the war, students are even less likely to realize that it was based on “intelligence” that was long-outdated, badly distorted, or patently false. Nor can we assume they realize that not a single weapon of mass destruction has been found in Iraq; that the fundamental pretext of the war proved baseless.

As new justifications for the war poured from the White House to replace those found unconvincing, perhaps even many adults soon forgot the boldness with which the war was initially promoted—how essential it was to our security and how we could pull it off in a

“cakewalk” for a mere \$60 billion. Vice President Cheney assured us that our troops would be greeted as liberators. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld scoffed at those who said we needed more troops to occupy Iraq. Less than six weeks into the war, President Bush, like a *Top Gun* stuntman, donned a flight suit and copiloted a naval jet onto the deck of an aircraft carrier—the *USS Abraham Lincoln*—strategically parked thirty miles off the California coast to accommodate the commander in chief’s theatrical entrance. He issued a triumphal speech in front of a giant sign reading, “Mission Accomplished.”

So many thousands have died in the years since Bush’s premature victory party it seems as if it belongs to another era altogether. And the administration’s apparent indifference to massive antiwar dissent makes it hard to remember how powerful the objections were even before the war began with “Shock and Awe” on March 19, 2003—how millions of people came together in small town squares and major cities throughout this country and the world to demonstrate, a massive and unprecedented effort to stop a war before it could start.

My point is that even vital recent history can be quickly forgotten, supplanted by the pressing events and diversions of the present, or, more alarmingly, transformed into mythic tales that may depend on gross omissions and outright fabrications but allow nations to preserve flattering views of their past, or at least easy and satisfying explanations for everything that went wrong. A full and candid reckoning with history may be particularly difficult in a culture like ours with such a strong tradition of looking ahead to a “new deal,” a “new frontier,” a “new world order,” as if the past has no bearing on the present. It’s enough to lead Gore Vidal to refer to us as the United States of Amnesia.

And so historians should feel a special obligation to remind us of important realities that may once have seemed obvious. Historical work thrives, of course, on new evidence and new interpretations, but it also depends on the daily practice of remembering and recovering, the struggle to get things right. As Gloria Emerson put it in her brilliant, now largely forgotten, classic about the Vietnam War, *Winners and Losers*, “it is important to remember, to spell the names correctly, to know the provinces, before we are persuaded that none of it happened, that none of us were in such places.”

Oral history has an important place in this memory work. As Carl Mirra makes clear in this compelling and important book, oral histories,

like all sources, should not be taken on faith but weighed alongside other accounts and evidence. Our memories are not merely partial and flawed, but selective, all-too-human in the way they support our prejudices and predilections. Yet they can also be great reservoirs of unknown, unacknowledged, and disparaged historical knowledge and experience. When carefully probed and scrutinized, memory can take us to unfamiliar places that challenge every convenient or self-serving claim about the past. War, perhaps more than any other human activity, is promoted and sustained in the language of abstraction—sacrifice, freedom, duty, civilization. As Hemingway once noted, those words sound obscene alongside the concrete realities of war, especially the bodies of the dead. The accounts in this book are not like accounts we typically hear from government officials and the major media. Individual testimonies like these can help us connect the detailed, lived experience of war to the larger claims about the war we all, as citizens, must hazard.

Mirra is an unapologetic critic of this war. His political views were largely shaped by his decision to leave the Marine Corps as a conscientious objector during the Persian Gulf War. And yet he has a genuine curiosity about points of view on all sides of the Iraq War debate and he includes the testimonies of veterans and policymakers who support the war alongside those of its critics. And even the critics come from a variety of political perspectives—Left, liberal, libertarian, and even conservative. Indeed, one of the more remarkable aspects of the Iraq War has been the degree to which it has inspired opposition from a fascinating mix of people who might disagree on many other issues, but are united in viewing this war as an illegitimate and dangerous abuse of American power.

A final thought: The voices in these pages, however different, share an engagement with the most serious events of our time. However difficult and depressing the subject can be, it is always inspiring to be in the presence of people struggling to offer witness from their own experience and to make meaning of it in relation to a larger history. It doesn't seem too much to say that democracy depends, in some measure, on such crucial acts of citizenship and the work of historians like Carl Mirra to elicit and enrich them.

## Acknowledgments

The idea for this book grew out of a conversation with Staughton Lynd. He insisted that historians should document the testimony of Iraq War veterans and argued that the Vietnam War was brought to an end by veterans who had turned against war. Recording the memories of Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans, his comments implied, might potentially alter the country's frame of reference on the war. The lifelong radical observed that any such effort should reach out to veterans whether their experience with the war was positive, negative or somewhere in between.

Together we launched an Oral History Working Group for the Historians against the War. Christian Appy, Monica and Kevin Benderman, Rosemary Feurer, Enrique Ochoa, Staughton, and I participated in the working group that was heartily supported by the historians. I compiled a pamphlet, which Jim O'Brien formatted and printed, entitled *Join Us? Testimonies of Iraq War Veterans and Their Families* in July 2006. It was the seed for this book.

The pamphlet was unapologetically antiwar and presented the voices of oppositional veterans exclusively. Marc Becker of Truman State University suggested that I interview veterans who supported the war, not necessarily in an attempt to achieve balance but to broaden the conversation. Since that time, what we call the "Left" has won the debate over the war. The administration's handling of the conflict has led a significant majority of the American populace to disapprove of the invasion.

Broadening the conversation seems worthwhile at this historical juncture. The voices of veterans of all political persuasions, who sacrificed the most among Americans, remain largely omitted from the public conversation on the war.

It occurred to me that I had little understanding of those veterans who supported the war. It also occurred to me that those who supported the war likely had an equally limited understanding of veterans (and citizens)

who opposed it. Therefore, this book seeks to present both sides so that we gain a better grasp of one another, not simply for the sake of understanding, but to alter the for/against framework that limits our creativity and options for solving the dilemmas surrounding the war.

I hope that my presentation of the material is fair to all sides and illustrates each person's commitment and sacrifice in a respectful manner. Interviewing combat veterans has had a profound impact on me. People shared visceral and often tearful stories, which have forever altered my views of warfare. At one point, I told the series editor, Linda Shopes, that I could not complete the project. I did not know how to reconcile the conflicting accounts and opinions with my own views on the war. She gently allowed me to think out loud and work through this impasse, and I owe her a special debt of gratitude. Chris Chappell at Palgrave Macmillan was equally patient, and I was fortunate to have him as my editor. His skillful editorial remarks improved the manuscript.

Throughout this project, I have attempted to moderate my political views so as to better understand the "other" side. There was a time when I impulsively derided soldiers as brainwashed mercenaries. In talking with soldiers who support the war, I encountered complex human beings, driven by a diverse set of motivations. Readers who back the war are invited to see the same complexity in the antiwar voices contained in the following pages. Just as I wrestled to break through to understand the other side, I encourage the reader to do the same as they work through the pages of this book.

What struck me was that few of those soldiers who supported the war expressed anger toward soldiers who turned to the antiwar movement. Conversely, most of the antiwar soldiers held little animosity toward their pro-war counterparts. This is not to say that all soldiers feel the same about their opponents. Rather than portraying certain veterans as good, and others as bad, both the pro and antiwar soldiers are "good" veterans who have sacrificed a great deal. It is my hope that the sample of veterans in this book provides a worthwhile model for public dialogue.

Several people helped by reading drafts or by providing contacts with potential interviewees. Marv Gettleman read my original proposal to Palgrave Macmillan, and registered a sharp yet helpful critique. I should thank Randy Rydell, a senior political affairs officer in the Office of the UN Undersecretary General for Disarmament Affairs, who made it possible for me to get in touch with Dr. Hans Blix. Karl Grossman introduced

me to Rydell, once again opening a door for me. Kelly Dougherty of Iraq Veterans against the War put me in touch with Camilo Mejía. Captain James McCormick and army historian Richard Killbane also assisted me in locating veterans to interview. I consider myself fortunate that Christian Appy read the complete manuscript and contributed a foreword. His supporting remarks at a panel (and after) where I presented some of the research on this book were most encouraging.

I especially wish to thank the interviewees in this book. They all graciously took time from their busy schedules to answer an array of questions. Listening to their stories has indeed been a transformative experience. Quite simply, I say to them all—thank you.