

## **Iraq Vets Testify to War Atrocities, Vow to Fight and Resist Bush Policy**

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"I was ordered multiple times by commissioned officers and noncommissioned officers to shoot unarmed civilians if their presence made me feel uncomfortable," Sgt. Jason Lemieux told a panel of lawmakers last Thursday in a packed public hearing on Capitol Hill. "These orders were given with the understanding that my immediate chain of command would protect our subordinates from legal repercussions." Lemieux, a former Marine who was part of the invading force that entered Baghdad in March 2003, came to Washington, D.C., with Iraq Veterans Against the War, weeks after the fifth anniversary of President George Bush's declaration of "Mission Accomplished" to tell Congress enough is enough. Invited by Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Calif., the veterans spoke firmly and eloquently before members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, telling stories that were just "the tip of the iceberg," as Lemieux put it, but which nevertheless offered a frightening range of accounts: violent house raids, the killings of innocent people, "drop weapons" used to make dead civilians look like insurgents, racism in the ranks, and their own process of dehumanization as they became inured to the humanity of those who they were supposedly sent to "liberate."

The morning was infused with a sense of urgency. "Every day that the occupation continues, more men, women and children will be killed, maimed, or forced to flee their country as refugees," said Kelly Dougherty, executive director of IVAW, in introductory remarks. "More veterans will return home with lifelong scars, emotional and physical, with little support to help them readjust.

"Many," she added, "will fall victim to suicide." Indeed, of the nine veterans who testified that day, two said they had tried to kill themselves after returning home.

Like the Winter Soldier hearings in March, when more than 200 service members gathered in Silver Spring, Md., to give their eyewitness accounts of the injustices occurring in Iraq and Afghanistan, "Winter Soldier on the Hill" was designed to drive home the human cost of the war and occupation -- this time, to the very people in charge of doing something about it. Elsewhere on Capitol Hill, the rest of Congress was

debating the next round of funding for the war -- whether to approve more than \$160 billion in additional taxpayer money to continue the occupation. "I think you know that the very issue that we're talking about today is on the House floor today," Woolsey noted -- a partial explanation for the small hearing room and the small handful of lawmakers who showed up. Even for those politicians who have consistently criticized the war, however, a group like IVAW -- whose platform includes immediate withdrawal of all occupation forces from Iraq, including contractors, as well as paying reparations to the Iraqi people -- is a politically risky ally. "I think we're generally viewed as too radical for most politicians," one IVAW field organizer and former military intelligence officer, T.J. Buonomo, said after the hearing. And this is a Congress where political courage has been in lethally short supply.

Not that IVAW expects Congress, after five years of cutting checks, to suddenly become the driving force that will end the war. Rather than lobbying politicians or pouring its energy into the presidential election, IVAW has focused on recruiting and chapter-building to fortify its ranks. Membership has reached 1,200, with members in all 50 states, as well as in Iraq, Afghanistan, and most recently, Germany. Concluding his remarks before the caucus, Washington, D.C., chapter head and nine-year veteran of the New York National Guard Geoffrey Millard spoke confidently about IVAW's role in fomenting an antiwar movement capable of ending the occupation. "The only remaining question is," he said, "will Congress be there to help us?"

### **"Welcome America to the second Vietnam"**

Growing up, all Kristofer Goldsmith wanted was to join the Army. "I wanted to be in the military my entire life," he recalled, showing a photograph of himself at age 10 in military garb. But whatever sense of patriotism inspired him to want to wear the uniform as a young boy became something different after 9/11; the Bush administration's lies linking the terrorist attacks with Saddam Hussein inspired a willing foot soldier for its "war on terror."

Goldsmith was 16 years old when the planes hit the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and he recalls thinking that the United States ought to use biological weapons to take out the entire Middle East. "I joined the Army to kill people," he admitted, "to kill Iraqis, to kill Muslims." Trained to use artillery -- "some of the most destructive weapons that the army has" -- he deployed in 2005, only to find himself in Sadr City doing "supposed humanitarian aid," which he

described as becoming "trumped by presence patrols" -- a daily reminder for Iraqis that they were surrounded by an "armed and dangerous army" patrolling their streets."

"It's basically fear tactics," Goldsmith said. The violence against civilians and the degrading conditions the occupation imposed on Iraqis became appalling to him. Slides he presented during his testimony showed raw sewage covering the floor at schools and the ground outside a hospital. "We made no attempts to repair it," he said. "We were unable to." In fact, the armored vehicles used by the military tore up the streets, exposing drinking water pipes to raw sewage. Goldsmith also showed a photograph he took of graffiti written on the side of a school in Sadr City that read, "Welcome America to the second Vietnam." It's not only critics in the United States who have drawn such comparisons, he said. Iraqis, he says, "are smart, educated people that are dying every day."

As the gross reality of the occupation hit home, rather than bloodlust, he felt unable to cope with the war as he experienced it. When Bush announced the "surge" in January 2007, Goldsmith had just gotten home. "I was stop-lossed the same week that I was supposed to get out of the army for an 18-month deployment," he said. But he never went. "I attempted suicide. I never deployed a second time. And because of that I received a general discharge. And I lost my college benefits; the \$40,000 promised to me in the Montgomery GI Bill, I will not be eligible to receive." Going to college after serving in the military, he said, had been his "one hope and dream."

A number of veterans cited their involvement in IVAW and the chance to tell their stories as a critical outlet, a way to make up for what one veteran called his own "moral death." It's clearly a process: The first time IVAW member James Gilligan told his story in public, at the March Winter Soldier hearings, he broke down. As a Marine corporal in Afghanistan, he had radioed in an erroneous target for a mortar attack that ended up striking a village and killing innocent civilians. As he spoke that day, his whole body appeared wracked with guilt. He too had attempted suicide. He has since spoken out many other times. After his testimony Thursday, he showed me a photograph of himself on "Mission Accomplished Day" and said he remembered thinking that he would soon be going home. Instead, five years later, he has served in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, and is now a committed speaker against the war. "I fly this flag upside down because my nation is in distress," he told the representatives, holding up an American flag.

## **"If you want to do something about PTSD, stop sending people into unjust wars"**

According to former Sgt. Adam Kokesh, who served in Fallujah during the height of the siege, post-traumatic stress disorder can be attributed to three things: "lack of confidence in equipment, lack of confidence in leadership, and lack of confidence in the mission." He added: "In Iraq, we have all three." The alarming rate of veteran suicide -- which has only recently begun to be reported -- loomed heavy over the hearing. Former Marine sniper Sergio Kochergin's voice strained as he told the story of a roommate who had been placed on suicide watch "on and off," only to be taken off in anticipation of "family day," so that he would not say anything to his parents -- "and he did not say anything to them." He was deployed not long after, only to shoot himself in the head in a shower stall, one month after arriving in Iraq. "The Marine should have never been deployed to Iraq in the first place," Kochergin said, "and nobody was held responsible for his death."

On the same day of the hearing, a story broke that revealed a disturbing new strategy for dealing with the influx of veterans reportedly suffering from PTSD: Stop diagnosing it. In an e-mail dated March 20 out of an office of the Department of Veterans Affairs (subject header: "suggestion"), a VA employee wrote: "Given that we are having more and more compensation-seeking veterans, I'd like to suggest that we refrain from giving a diagnosis of PTSD straight out. Consider a diagnosis of Adjustment Disorder, R/O PTSD." The National Institutes of Health defines adjustment disorder as an "abnormal and excessive reaction to a life stressor, such as starting school, getting divorced, or grief" and says that symptoms "usually do not last longer than six months." Compare that to the definition for PTSD, which "can occur after you've seen or experienced a traumatic event that involved the threat of injury or death" and which, in some cases, "can last for many years." Now, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW), which broke the story, has submitted Freedom of Information Act requests seeking "all records pertaining to any guidance given regarding the diagnosis of PTSD." "It is outrageous that the VA is calling on its employees to deliberately misdiagnose returning veterans in an effort to cut costs," said CREW Executive Director Melanie Sloan.

"If you want to do something about PTSD," said Kokesh after the hearing, "stop sending people into unjust wars."

## **Who really supports the troops?**

Perhaps more than the question of additional funding for the occupation, the debate that riles veterans the most is the current political battle over the GI Bill, which, in at least one version -- that of Democrat Jim Webb of Virginia -- proposes full scholarships for service members to any in-state public university. Bush and the Defense Department oppose it, primarily because they claim it would provide too large an incentive to leave the military and go to college. In an interview last month, paralyzed Iraq war vet Tomas Young (also of IVAW, and the subject of the powerful documentary "Body of War") recalled the reaction of his brother, who is currently in Iraq, to such twisted logic: "Just being in Iraq is an incentive to leave the military!" he exclaimed. The notion that sending soldiers to college would be a bad thing is the worst brand of cynicism.

Many veterans have turned their indignation into action. Last month a petition featuring some 30,000 veterans' signatures arrived at the office of John McCain, urging him to get behind in Webb's legislation. But the candidate who wraps himself in the banner of patriotism and support for the troops has refused to back it, parroting Bush's line that it could lead enlistees to choose college over war. "There is a senator in Congress, currently running for president, who is fighting to kill our Webb GI bill," said Goldsmith. "And I'm one of the soldiers who will never get that money." In fact, by the end of the day Thursday, the House had passed its version of the Webb GI bill by a vote of 256 to 166. But the \$163 billion for the war was ultimately blocked.

Members of IVAW are not naive to the political context of last week's hearings -- nor are they content to see their day on the Hill as a largely symbolic development. When U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee, a Texas Democrat, asked the second panel of veterans if they would be willing to bring out 100,000 people to march on the National Mall against the war, all of them answered respectfully, but frankly. "Beyond amassing hundreds of thousands of people here -- which has been done before to no avail -- there has to be clear objectives," said former Army Capt. Luis Montalvan, who worked extensively for General David Petraeus. Indeed, for those in the room who have marched countless times against the war -- sometimes alongside the very building where the hearing took place -- the exchange contained a sad irony.

"I think it's important to take everything with a grain of salt," Buonomo said when asked how much faith can be placed in Congress. At the same time, he called the hearing a "great opportunity." "To me, it was very encouraging that we have legislators who are taking a

principled stand." To what end may remain unclear, but for starters, the possibility that IVAW members will have a chance to testify again - - this time before a committee -- seems much more likely. When Jackson-Lee asked if the veterans would return to Capitol Hill to testify under oath -- and provide documents -- the answers were unequivocal: "Absolutely, yes." And although "Winter Soldier on the Hill" was billed as the first official testimony by IVAW before members of Congress, a handful of other members had spoken to members of Congress the day before, at a two-part hearing sponsored by Jackson-Lee and Iowa Republican Sen. Charles Grassley. The subject was protecting whistle-blowers; Buonomo was one of three IVAW members who testified, having been involuntarily discharged for, as he called it, "speaking out against the occupation of Iraq and the policies of our government."

### **"This soldier will not be deploying to Iraq"**

Perhaps one of the most significant statements of the day was made after the hearing, in the rotunda of an adjacent congressional building. There, Sgt. Matthis Chiroux stood before cameras and the public to announce his decision to refuse to deploy to Iraq. It was a move that Gilligan described as "momentous" -- especially as it had been inspired by the Winter Soldier hearings back in March. "As an Army journalist whose job it was to collect and filter service members' stories, I heard many stomach-churning testimonies of the horrors and crimes taking place in Iraq," said Chiroux. "For fear of retaliation from the military, I failed to report these crimes, but never again will I allow fear to silence me. Never again will I fail to stand."

"In February, I received a letter from the Army ordering my return to active duty, for the purpose of mobilization for Operation Iraqi Freedom. Thanks in great part to the truths of war being fearlessly spoken by my fellow IVAW members, I stand before you today with the strength, clarity and resolve to declare to the military and the world that this soldier will not be deploying to Iraq."

"This occupation is unconstitutional and illegal, and I hereby lawfully refuse to participate, as I will surely be a party to war crimes. Furthermore, deployment in support of illegal war violates all of my core values as a human being, but in keeping with those values, I choose to remain in the United States to defend myself from charges brought by the Army if they so wish to pursue them. I refuse to participate in the occupation of Iraq."

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