

KILROY'S STILL HERE *Sean Penn*

IN EARLY OCTOBER OF 2002 – WHEN THE RADIO SPATTERED AND WHINED WITH ACCUSATIONS BY THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION DECLARING A DIRECT LINK BETWEEN THE TERRORIST ACTIVITY OF AL QAEDA AND THE BRUTAL DICTATOR SADDAM HUSSEIN; I WAS SITTING BESIDE MY 11-YEAR OLD DAUGHTER IN A CAR. IT CONTINUED, WITH CHARGES THAT HUSSEIN'S IRAQ POSSESSED WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION IN VIOLATION OF U.N. RESOLUTIONS.

"IT'S A SUNNY AFTERNOON IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA," THE WEATHERMAN INTERRUPTED, "PUFFY WHITE CLOUDS RESTING UPON A BEAUTIFUL BLUE SKY." WE SAT IN THE CAR EATING FRENCH FRIES IN THE PARKING LOT OF OUR LOCAL BURGER JOINT. PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH HAD JUST REBUFFED THE UNITED NATIONS' PUSH TO RE-INTRODUCE WEAPONS INSPECTION TEAMS INTO AN IRAQ WHERE EVEN A DESERVEDLY HUMILIATED SADDAM HUSSEIN HAD EXPRESSED WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT THEM. TIGHTENING IN MY GUT, ON THIS OTHERWISE FAB DAY, WERE TROUBLING QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR NATION'S UNDERSTANDING OF THIS PENDING CONFLICT. ITS MOST ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION SOURCES WERE THE CORPORATELY SPONSORED AND LARGELY CONSERVATIVE MEDIA OUTLETS. INDEED, IN MY GUT, WERE MY OWN TROUBLING QUESTIONS, NOT ONLY ABOUT OUR ADMINISTRATION'S UNILATERAL MILITARY POSTURING, BUT ALSO, WHAT EFFECT U.S. DECISIONS TODAY MIGHT HAVE ON MY CHILDREN'S TOMORROW.

SINCE SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, WHEN KILROY LEFT HIS MARK, I HAD BEEN, OF COURSE, CONCERNED FOR THE PHYSICAL SAFETY OF MY CHILDREN, AND THOSE OF THE NATION. MORE URGENTLY THOUGH, FOR THE FOOD OF THEIR SPIRIT, THEIR SENSE OF RIGHT AND WRONG, AND OF THEIR WILL TO BE INDIVIDUALS OF CHARACTER AND TRUE PATRIOTISM IN A MEDIA ENVIRONMENT LARGELY EXEMPLIFIED BY MISTRUST, DISHONESTY, CENSORSHIP AND NATIONAL POLICIES FOSTERING DIVISION, DEATH, AND ARBITRARY CONSUMERISM.

SAINT AUGUSTINE SAID THAT "HOPE HAS TWO BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTERS: ANGER AND COURAGE; ANGER AT THE WAY THINGS ARE, AND COURAGE TO CHANGE THEM." BESIDE ME, MY LITTLE GIRL TUGGED AT THE BLUE RIBBON IN HER BLOND HAIR, HER EYES FORWARD, GENTLE BUT UNBLINKING; HER FRONT TEETH NIPPED AT A FRENCH FRY, ONE SLOW BITE AT A TIME. AS I STARTED THE CAR, I WONDERED IF HER FUTURE AND MY SON'S WOULD BEFRIEND OR BE VANQUISHED BY SAINT AUGUSTINE'S DAUGHTERS OF HOPE. AND I HAD TO ASK MYSELF, "WHAT REMAINING HOPE DID I HAVE? WHAT EXAMPLE WAS I TO THEM?" I CARRIED MY TROUBLING QUESTIONS TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, IN A PUBLIC LETTER PRINTED OCTOBER 18, 2002, IN THE WASHINGTON POST.

I'M NEITHER A PEACE ACTIVIST NOR A PARTISAN POLITICO AND THE LETTER I PRINTED DID NOT REPRESENT THE PLATFORM OF ANY MOVEMENT, OR SPEAK WITH DETERMINATION AGAINST ANY NECESSITY. MY LETTER SPOKE TO QUESTIONS OF AN AMERICAN MAN AND FATHER, PROTECTED AND ENCOURAGED BY OUR CONSTITUTION, AND OBLIGED BY MY OWN INDIVIDUAL SENSE OF DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY. I HAD BEEN INSPIRED TO SPEAK UP BY MY LOVE OF MY CHILDREN, WHICH RECALLED MY ADMIRATION FOR OUR FOUNDING FATHERS, AND THE TRADITION OF THOUSANDS OF ENGAGED MEN AND WOMEN BEFORE ME. IN MY OWN WAY, I SOUGHT TO JOIN ALL OF THEM IN WAVING THE AMERICAN FLAG.

FOLLOWING THE PRINTING OF THAT LETTER, MY PUBLIC FLAG, I WAS HIT BY A TIDAL WAVE OF MEDIA MISREPRESENTATION, AND EVEN ACCUSATIONS OF TREASON. I EXPERIENCED FIRSTHAND THE REPRESSIVE CONDITION OF PUBLIC DEBATE IN OUR COUNTRY, AS IT PREPARED FOR WAR. I WAS BEGINNING TO FEEL THE PRICE TO BE PAID BY A CITIZEN EXERCISING A POSITION OF DISSENT.

IF MY HOPE AS AN AMERICAN WAS NOT DWINDLING, IT WAS CERTAINLY UNDER SIEGE. HOPE THOUGH, LIKE TRUTH, IS A STUBBORN CREATURE.

IN EARLY DECEMBER 2002, I WAS INVITED BY NORMAN SOLOMON OF THE INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC ACCURACY TO JOIN HIM ON HIS JOURNALISTIC TOUR OF BAGHDAD. I MET WITH NORMAN AND DID SOME DUE DILIGENCE ON THE IPA. NORMAN IS A SOFT-SPOKEN GENTLEMAN, AND A RELENTLESS AUTHOR OF BOOKS, ESSAYS, AND ARTICLES EXPOSING MEDIA TRUTH AND FICTION. HE IS A SCHOLAR OF MEDIA TRUTH BENDING AND BREAKING, AND HIS IPA IS AN AMERICAN NON-PROFIT MOBILIZER DEDICATED TO THAT JOURNALISTIC MISSION. THERE WAS NO QUESTION IN MY GUT ON THIS ONE. I ACCEPTED NORMAN'S INVITATION AND WAS GOING TO IRAQ.

I ACKNOWLEDGED THE CONCERNS OF MY WIFE AND CHILDREN FOR MY SAFETY AND THEY ACKNOWLEDGED MY NEED TO REPLACE TELEVISION IMAGES WITH A REAL SENSE OF PLACE AND PEOPLE (IF ONLY THE KIND ONE GETS VISITING ANYWHERE FOR THE FIRST TIME). YOU SEARCH FOR A TASTE, A SMELL, A PIECE OF TRUTH, SOMETHING TO ATTACH TO THE QUESTIONS OF CONSCIENCE THAT GNAW AT MANY OF US.

IT WAS VERY CLEAR THAT MY TRIP, LIKE MY LETTER, WOULD BE MISREPRESENTED BOTH IN THE UNITED STATES AND BY THE IRAQI PRESS. BUT MY VIEW IS UNCHANGED, THAT AS A WEAPON OF PROPAGANDA, IT WOULD ONLY BE THE MOST POPULAR AMERICAN MEDIA THAT COULD DO MYSELF AND EVENTUALLY OUR INCREASINGLY DEPLOYED TROOPS ANY REAL HARM. THE UNITED STATES HAD ALL THE CARDS. WE HAVE THE GREATEST MILITARY MIGHT ON THE PLANET. THE IRAQ I VISITED WAS THE MOST DECIMATED, STARVED, DISEASED AND POLLUTED PLACE I HAD EVER WITNESSED. MUCH OF THIS, THE RESULT OF SANCTIONS IMPOSED UPON ITS PEOPLE BY A UNITED STATES-LED COALITION, AND EXACERBATED BY THE WILLFUL EXPLOITATION OF THEM BY THEIR OWN LEADERSHIP. SADDAM HUSSEIN'S THREE-PAGE HOKEY MAILER OF A NEWSPAPER, PROMOTING MY VISIT AS SUPPORT FOR HIS LEADERSHIP, WOULD BE NO MATCH FOR THE POSITIONS TAKEN BY OUR OWN GLOBAL NETWORKS IN WILLFUL FALSE DEPICTION OF MY INTENTIONS AND STATEMENTS. I MADE NO COMMENTS IN BAGHDAD AGAINST OUR GOVERNMENT. NOT ONE. I DID, HOWEVER, DECLARE AN ACCEPTANCE OF SOME PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MY GOVERNMENT'S ACTIONS, THOSE THEN, AND NOW, PAID FOR IN PART BY MY TAX DOLLARS.

IN SHORT, WE DESERVE THE GOVERNMENT WE ALLOW, AND NONE MORE THAN THOSE OF US WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED ECONOMIC AND PERSONAL PRIVILEGE. IN IRAQ, I MADE NO EXPERT ASSERTIONS AND CAME TO NO ABSOLUTE CONCLUSIONS. PRIOR TO, DURING, AND SINCE VISITING IRAQ, I HAVE CONSULTED OVER 100 EXPERTS IN OUR MIDDLE EASTERN AFFAIRS, MILITARY

AND CIVILIAN, WITH A PRIMARY FOCUS ON U.N. WEAPONS INSPECTION CAPABILITIES. THESE CONSULTATIONS MEASURABLY INCREASED MY DOUBT AT THE FACTUALITY OR THE WISDOM OF THE ADMINISTRATION'S ASSERTIONS AND PROPOSED REMEDIES. I SPOKE AT LENGTH WITH WARY WAR CORRESPONDENTS WHOSE REPEATED ATTEMPTS TO BRING DEEPER UNDERSTANDING TO THE AMERICAN PUBLIC WERE CONSISTENTLY THWARTED BY EDITORIAL STAFFS, NETWORKS, AND SUPERIORS, BOTH IRAQI AND AMERICAN.

WHILE IN BAGHDAD, I VISITED A PEDIATRIC HOSPITAL, SCHOOLS, PEOPLE ON THE STREETS, IRAQI OFFICIALS, THEIR CHRISTIAN DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AZIZ, AND MINISTER OF HEALTH MUBAREK. I MET WITH HUMANITARIAN AIDES, U.N. OFFICIALS, THE LOCAL DIRECTOR OF UNICEF (A DUTCHMAN), AND AN 8-YEAR-OLD IRAQI BOY WHO HAD BEEN MAIMED BY A CRUISE MISSILE IN BASRA WHILE HIS OLDER BROTHER PERISHED IN THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION BOMBINGS OF 1998.

I RETURNED TO THE UNITED STATES WITH A VIEW TO BE DIGESTED, SOMETHING I WOULD HAVE TO BE VERY CAREFUL AND THOUGHTFUL IN SHARING PUBLICLY, AND DISCERNING IN ACCEPTANCE OF A VENUE TO DO SO. I WAITED OUT THE FIRST SERIES OF RABID ATTACKS ON MY CHARACTER, PROFESSION, INTELLIGENCE, EXPERIENCE, AGENDA, EGO, EFFECTIVENESS, AND PATRIOTISM. I CHOSE TO APPEAR ON LARRY KING'S SHOW, FOLLOWED BY AN INTERVIEW ON THE ACTIVE OPPOSITION, A WORLD LINK TV POLITICAL SHOW HOSTED BY MY FRIEND, PETER COYOTE. THIS HAD BEEN THE EXTENT OF MY PUBLIC COMMENTARY ON THIS ISSUE IN THE UNITED STATES, WHEN ON MARCH 20, 2003, OUR PRESIDENT ORDERED OUR MILITARY INTO WAR WITH IRAQ.

IF MILITARY INTERVENTION IN IRAQ HAS BEEN A GRAVE MISJUDGMENT, IT HAS BEEN ONE RESULTING IN THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF DEATHS, AND DONE SO WITHOUT ANY CREDIBLE EVIDENCE OF IMMINENT THREAT TO THE UNITED STATES. OUR FLAG HAS BEEN WAVING, IT SEEMS, IN SERVICING A REGIME CHANGE SIGNIFICANTLY BENEFITING U.S. CORPORATIONS. WHAT REMAINS TO BE SEEN IS AN EFFECTIVE PLAN FOR THE REBUILDING OF THE CIVILIAN INFRASTRUCTURE, OR ANY OTHER BENEFIT TO THE PEOPLE OF IRAQ OR THE UNITED STATES. IT IS AN ACHIEVEMENT THAT INCLUDES THE CALLOUS AND TOO EASILY ACCEPTED TERM, "COLLATERAL DAMAGE." THIS IS A TERM WHERE PROPORTIONALITY OF LOSS IS TAKEN FROM THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE LOST, AND GIVEN TO MARKETING EXECUTIVES.

ON LARRY KING'S SHOW, I APPEALED TO AMERICAN MOTHERS AND FATHERS TO SIT WITH A SCRAP OF PAPER AND A PENCIL AND SCRIBBLE THE FOLLOWING WORDS, "DEAR MR. AND MRS. (YOUR NAME HERE), WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON/DAUGHTER (CHILD'S NAME HERE) WAS KILLED IN ACTION IN IRAQ..." I ASKED THAT THOSE MOTHERS AND FATHERS FINISH THAT LETTER IN A WAY THAT WOULD COMFORT THEM IF THEY WERE TO RECEIVE IT. THIS WAR, FOR ALL ITS MILITARY TRIUMPH, WOULD PROVIDE NO SATISFACTORY COMPLETION OF THAT LETTER FOR *THIS* FATHER. THE HUMAN DEATH TOLL OF THIS CORPORATE MARCH INCLUDES THOSE COURAGEOUS AND HEROIC AMERICANS WHO LOST THEIR LIVES. AS AMERICANS CONSIDERING LOSS OF LIFE, WE ARE AT LIBERTY TO CLAIM UNBIASED HUMANITARIANISM, BUT FEW AMONG US ARE EVER SO POIGNANTLY SADDENED AS WITH THE LOSS OF A YOUNG AMERICAN SOLDIER FIGHTING FOR HIS COUNTRY IN A LONELY, FOREIGN LAND. AND I AM NO EXCEPTION. AND WHAT OF THE WOUNDS OF BODY AND SPIRIT IN MANY OF THOSE WHO SURVIVED? I ASK TO JOIN IN CELEBRATING THOSE SOLDIERS, ALL OF THEM. THEY ARE EVERY BIT THE HEROES OF WORLD WAR II, OF KOREA, AND EVERY BIT THE HEROES OF VIETNAM (WHERE POSTWAR SUICIDES OF VETERANS TOTALED HIGHER NUMBERS THAN THOSE KILLED IN BATTLE, AND THE TERM "COLLATERAL DAMAGE" BROADENED ITS SCOPE). UNIMAGINABLE IS THE LOSS FELT BY THE FAMILIES OF THE DEAD. ARE WE WILLING TO CONSIDER THAT THE RIGHTEOUS EXECUTION OF A SOLDIER'S DUTY, TRAINING, UNITY, AND MISSION, HAS ALWAYS STOOD OR FALLEN, TO THE DEGREE THE CITIZENS THEY SERVE STRUGGLE AT HOME FOR THE RIGHTS OUR SOLDIERS PLEDGE TO FIGHT FOR ABROAD? IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT PRESIDENT BUSH'S 2004 BUDGET PROPOSED A 6.2 BILLION DOLLAR CUT IN VETERANS' HEALTH AND WELFARE BENEFITS.

IN RE-EVALUATING THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CITIZENSHIP AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN THE POST-9/11 AGE, THERE HAVE BEEN DISPARATE OPINIONS AMONG AMERICANS ABOUT HOW SUPPORTING OUR TROOPS WOULD NOW BE DEFINED, HOW SUPPORTING OUR PRINCIPLES WOULD NOW BE DEFINED, AND HOW THE "RULE OF LAW" WOULD NOW BE UPHELD. IN WHAT WAY WOULD DISSENT BE MOST PRODUCTIVE WITHIN A SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT THAT DOES NOT EXIST WITHOUT QUESTIONING BY ITS PEOPLE? WE ACCEPTED THAT JOURNALISTS WERE "EMBEDDED" WITH RELIANCE ON THEIR SUBJECT, THE MILITARY, TO KEEP THEM FROM HARM'S WAY. WE FOUND THAT OUR SECRETARY OF STATE PRESENTED PLAGIARIZED AND FICTITIOUS EVIDENCE OF WMD'S IN IRAQ TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE AND THE WORLD. WE WOULD RELY ON THIS, OUR GOVERNMENT, ACTING ALONE, TO UNCOVER THOSE WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION SAID TO BE POSSESSED BY THE IRAQIS AND ORIGINALLY SAID TO HAVE JUSTIFIED OUR ASSAULT. A SIMILAR JUSTIFICATION CAME OUT OF MILITARY SOURCES IN BAGHDAD, WHEN AN AMERICAN TANK FIRED ON JOURNALISTS ON THE SIXTH FLOOR OF THE PALESTINE HOTEL IN RESPONSE TO SHOTS CLAIMED TO HAVE BEEN FIRED ON THEM FROM THAT BUILDING'S LOBBY. IN A HOTEL FULL OF INTERNATIONAL JOURNALISTS, NOT ONE HEARD THE SHOTS THAT THE MILITARY REPORTED TO HAVE PRECEDED THEIR "RESPONSE". WE WOULD WATCH AS THE UNITED NATIONS WAS DESCRIBED "UNNECESSARY," RATHER THAN USEFUL, IF ONLY AS AN OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE, INSPIRING SOME DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL FAITH IN A NEW FOUND AMERICAN WEAPONS INSPECTIONS PROCESS THAT IS COVERT AT BEST. ANY RESPONSIBLE PERSON MUST ASK, IN WHOSE HANDS OUR FLAG NOW WAVES AND WHAT PERCEPTION THE WORLD MAY HAVE OF IT IN THOSE HANDS.

EVEN AS THE NEW YORK TIMES PRESENTS UNCHALLENGING ARTICLES (SEE JUDITH MILLER, APRIL 21, 2003, "PROHIBITED WEAPONS") ON A WEAPONS INSPECTIONS PROCESS NOW IN PLACE, UNNOTICED ARE THE LEGITIMATE CONCERNS ABOUT POTENTIAL INSERTION OF WMD EVIDENCE. OUR TELEVISION CHANNELS SHOW IMAGES OF GRATEFUL AND LIBERATED IRAQIS WITH NO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT TRUE POVERTY WILL BRING THE BEST OF US TO OUR KNEES, WHERE WE WOULD HONOR ANY INDIVIDUAL OR NATION WHO HELD FOOD. OUR KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF ARAB CULTURE AND ISLAMIC BELIEF IS SKETCHY AT BEST. WHILE SADDAM HUSSEIN WAS CERTAINLY

A BEAST AMONG MEN, AND WHILE HIS PEOPLE, TO ANY DEGREE THAT WE WOULD PRESUME COMPREHENSION, WERE UNDER THE THUMB OF BRUTAL OPPRESSION IN HIS HANDS, WE MUST REFLECT AS WE TRIUMPH AT THE IMAGE OF AN AMERICAN SOLDIER CRADLING AN IRAQI INFANT, WITH NO CURIOSITY AS TO THE FATE OF ITS PARENTS. AND WHAT OF THE SHOCKING RISE IN LEUKEMIAS AND OTHER CANCERS IN IRAQ DUE TO DEPLETED-URANIUM EXPOSURE AND OF THE THOUSANDS OF UNEXPLODED ORDINANCES, BOTH, GIFTS OF U.S. ARTILLARY. WILL WE REMEMBER THE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN WHO SUFFERED SLOW AND AGONIZING DEATHS BY DIARRHEA? THESE PRIMARILY ATTRIBUTED TO THE U.S.-LED SANCTIONS IN IRAQ, WHERE BOMBING OF WATER TREATMENT PLANTS AND AN EMBARGO ON CHLORINE CONTINUED TO RAVAGE PREDOMINANTLY YOUNG VICTIMS. WE MUST REFLECT ON THE CERTAINTY WITH WHICH WE WERE SOLD A WAR ON THE BASIS OF WHAT WE NOW SO EXPERTLY CALL WMDs. WE MUST REFLECT ON THE RESENTMENT OF THE WORLD, INVITED IN OUR POSITIONING OURSELVES AS THEIR POLICE. WITH SYRIA, IRAN, AND NORTH KOREA ON MEDIA HIT LISTS, WE MUST REFLECT ON THE AVAILABILITY OF FUNDS FOR VIOLENT CRUSADES IN THE ABSENCE OF FUNDING CRUSADES FOR HEALING THE VERY REAL SUFFERING OF OUR OWN PEOPLE AND OTHERS.

THIS IS OUR MONEY I SPEAK OF, NOT THEIRS. OURS. OUR DEMOCRACY. OUR FLAG. (LEST WE FORGET ENRON) BUT, WE SEE EXON. WE SEE BECHTEL. WE SEE HALLIBURTON. WE SEE BUSH, CHENEY, RUMSFELD, WOLFOWITZ, POWELL, RICE, PERLE, ASHCROFT, MURDOCH, MANY. WE SEE NO WMDs. WE SEE DEAD YOUNG AMERICANS. WE SEE NO WMDs. WE SEE DEAD IRAQI CIVILIANS. WE SEE NO WMDs. WE SEE CHAOS IN THE BAGHDAD STREETS. BUT NO WMDs. WE SEE THE DISAPPEARANCE OF A MURDEROUS IRAQI DICTATOR, WHO RELENTED HIS STRUGGLE AND RAN WITHOUT THE USE OF WMDs.

NOW I WANT TO SEE ONE MORE THING. IN IRAQ, AND IN THE UNITED STATES, I WANT TO SEE WHO'S THE BOSS. I WANT TO SEE WHO'S THE PEOPLE. I WANT TO SEE WHO ARE THE SHEEP. AND I WANT TO KNOW THE LIONS. I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE FUTURE OF THE IRAQI PEOPLE WILL BE. I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE FUTURE OF OUR OWN PEOPLE WILL BE. I DO KNOW, THAT WHILE WE ALL WATCHED THE HEADLINES, THE DRAMA, THE INDELIBLE, THE HORRIFYING AND FOREVER UNJUSTIFIABLE VIOLENCE THAT OCCURRED IN THE UNITED STATES ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, THAT IT HAS DIVERTED OUR EYES FROM THE BEAUTY OF THIS COUNTRY, AND ITS FOUNDATION THAT ACT WAS INTENDED TO SHAKE. IT SEEMS OSAMA BIN LADEN'S AGENDA IS BEING FURTHERED BY OUR FEAR, PROMOTED BY THE INVECTIVE LANGUAGE OF MEDIA AND A CONGRESS THAT SHAMEFULLY COWERS FROM CRITICISM, AS WE HACK AWAY AT THE ARMS, THE LEGS, AND THE SOUL OF OUR OWN CIVIL LIBERTIES, OUR CONSTITUTION, OUR PRINCIPLES, AND OUR FLAG.

THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A TIME WHEN IT HAS BEEN MORE IMPORTANT FOR CITIZENS TO STAND UP, TO SPEAK, TO AGREE, TO DISAGREE, TO RESOLVE, TO BE NON-VIOLENT. TO BE NON-VIOLENT. WHEN WE ALLOW PRIDEFUL KILLERS TO DEFINE OUR VALUE AS PRESUMPTION, THEN ONLY MURDER CAN LIVE IN OUR DREAMS. WE CAN'T BE SHAMED INTO HIDING, FRIGHTENED INTO LINE. WE CAN'T BE LESS THAN YESTERDAY. AND WE CAN'T SIT STILL TODAY. NOT IF WE LOVE OUR CHILDREN. THIS IS A QUESTION OF A PEOPLES' INTERNAL REFLECTION PRECEDING THEIR GOVERNMENT'S EXTERNAL REACTION. IN 1939, WILLIAM SAROYAN WROTE :

"IN THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE, LIVE — SO THAT IN THAT GOOD TIME THERE SHALL BE NO UGLINESS OR DEATH FOR YOURSELF OR FOR ANY LIFE YOUR LIFE TOUCHES. SEEK GOODNESS EVERYWHERE, AND WHEN IT IS FOUND, BRING IT OUT OF ITS HIDING-PLACE AND LET IT BE FREE AND UNASHAMED. PLACE IN MATTER AND IN FLESH THE LEAST OF THE VALUES, FOR THESE ARE THE THINGS THAT HOLD DEATH AND MUST PASS AWAY. DISCOVER IN ALL THINGS THAT WHICH SHINES AND IS BEYOND CORRUPTION. ENCOURAGE VIRTUE IN WHATEVER HEART IT MAY HAVE BEEN DRIVEN INTO SECRECY AND SORROW BY THE SHAME AND TERROR OF THE WORLD. IGNORE THE OBVIOUS, FOR IT IS UNWORTHY OF THE CLEAR EYE AND THE KINDLY HEART. BE THE INFERIOR OF NO MAN, NOR OF ANY MAN BE THE SUPERIOR. REMEMBER THAT EVERY MAN IS A VARIATION OF YOURSELF. NO MAN'S GUILT IS NOT YOURS, NOR IS ANY MAN'S INNOCENCE A THING APART. DESPISE EVIL AND UNGODLINESS, BUT NOT MEN OF UNGODLINESS OR EVIL. THESE, UNDERSTAND. HAVE NO SHAME IN BEING KINDLY AND GENTLE, BUT IF THE TIME COMES IN THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE TO KILL, KILL AND HAVE NO REGRET. IN THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE, LIVE — SO THAT IN THAT WONDROUS TIME YOU SHALL NOT ADD TO THE MISERY AND SORROW OF THE WORLD, BUT SHALL SMILE TO THE INFINITE DELIGHT AND MYSTERY OF IT."

PHILOSOPHICALLY, SAROYAN OFFERS A NOBLE ASPIRATION. BUT WE HAVE TO BE VERY CAREFUL, WHETHER LISTENING TO THE TELEVISION AFTER A HARD DAY'S WORK, OR WHILE READING A POEM AT A LUXURY RESORT, TO BE MEN AND WOMEN OF OUR OWN TIME. WHEN HE WROTE ABOUT A TIME "TO KILL" HE WROTE IN A WORLD WITHOUT NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION, MASSIVE GLOBALIZATION, TELEVISION, OR THE DECIMATION OF A NATION'S LONG HELD TRADITIONS. HE WAS A MAN OF HIS TIME AS WE ARE OF OURS. WE ARE STRUGGLING NOW WITH THE QUESTION OF WHETHER THERE IS ANY LONGER A TIME TO KILL. WE ARE GRAPPLING PERHAPS WITH MEMETIC EVOLUTION. GOD HELP US, AT SOME POINT WE MAY NEED TO EXERCISE MILITARY ACTION TO COUNTER REAL AND SPECIFICALLY TARGETED THREATS. BUT REAL THREATS REQUIRE THE EXISTENCE OF REAL OPPOSITION IN DEBATING STRATEGIES WHERE THE LIVES OF AMERICAN SOLDIERS AND INNOCENT CIVILIANS ARE THREATENED. WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, NOTABLY CONGRESSPEOPLE BARBARA LEE AND DENNIS KUCINICH AND SENATORS ROBERT BYRD AND TED KENNEDY, THE DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP HAS BEEN ENTIRELY COMPLICIT. AND IT HAS BEEN AN OBSCENE AND COWARDLY BETRAYAL OF THEIR CONSTITUENCIES.

I'M NOT A DEMOCRAT, NOT A REPUBLICAN, NOT A GREEN, NOT ALIGNED WITH ANY PARTY. YET, AS A CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES, I WAS RAISED IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM OF THE 1960'S AND '70S. EACH MORNING, FOLLOWING THE FIRST BELL, WE WERE CALLED UPON AS YOUNG BOYS AND GIRLS TO

STAND, PUT OUR RIGHT HAND OVER OUR HEARTS, AND PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE TO THE FLAG OF OUR COUNTRY. AS A SCHOOLBOY, I PARTICIPATED IN THIS TRADITION UNQUESTIONINGLY AND BY ROTE. WHEN IN FACT, NEITHER FLAG, NOR COUNTRY, NOR SCHOOL FOR THAT MATTER, IS OF MUCH INTEREST TO MOST YOUNG BOYS DREAMING OF BICYCLE RIDES, SURFING, OR THE GIRL IN THE FRONT OF THE CLASS. (WAS IT THE WAY THE FLAG WAVED OR THE WAVE OF HER HAIR I'D PLEDGED TO?... I DON'T REMEMBER.)

OF COURSE, WITH AGE, AND MATURITY, COME EXAMINATION OF, AND REBELLION TOWARD, THE TRADITIONS AND COMPULSORY BEHAVIORS OF OUR CHILDHOOD. WITH SOME TIME HOWEVER, WE GAIN AT LEAST AN OBJECTIVE APPRECIATION AND RESPECT FOR THE GREAT SYMBOL OF SACRIFICE AND HEROISM REFLECTED IN SUCH AN ICON AS OUR FLAG (ALBEIT HISTORICALLY AND PRESENTLY INTERMINGLED WITH VARYING DEGREES OF CORRUPTION AND EXPLOITATION). ULTIMATELY THOUGH, AS WITH MANY THINGS IN THIS LIFE, THESE SYMBOLS ARE VULNERABLE TO UNDER-APPRECIATION, UNTIL WE HAVE LOST THEM. I AM AN AMERICAN AND I FEAR THAT I, AND OUR PEOPLE ARE ON THE VERGE OF LOSING OUR FLAG. IF IT IS LOST, IT WILL HAVE BEEN UNDER OUR WATCH, UNDER MINE AND UNDERMINED.

ONLY FIVE SHORT YEARS AGO, SEPTEMBER 12TH, 1998, I SAT UPON A WOODEN CHURCH PEW AS A MILITARY HONOR GUARD REACHED ACROSS MY LAP TO PLACE A PRECISELY FOLDED AMERICAN FLAG INTO THE STOIC HANDS OF MY FATHER'S WIDOW. HIS BELOVED WIFE OF FORTY-ONE YEARS... MY MOTHER. MY DAD, LEO PENN HAD DIED FROM LUNG CANCER AT THE AGE OF 77. (THE LAST TIME I SAW MY FATHER WAS IN A VIEWING CASKET ON SEPTEMBER 11TH.) A DECORATED SOLDIER IN WORLD WAR II AND A BLACKLISTED ARTIST IN THE '50S, IT WAS THIS CLOTH OF STARS AND STRIPES AND ALL IT HAD MEANT TO HIM, AND HAD COME TO MEAN TO ME, THAT BROUGHT UNEXPECTED AND UNRESTRAINED EMOTION. THE SOLDIER, IN HIS FINE DRESS UNIFORM, BEGAN TO SPEAK TO MY MOTHER "IN THE NAME OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES AND IN GRATITUDE FOR YOUR HUSBAND'S HEROIC..." AND THAT WAS IT, I WAS GONE. I THOUGHT, WHERE THE HELL DID THIS FLOOD OF EMOTION COME FROM?

BUT, THE ANSWER CAME QUICKLY. MY FATHER LOVED THIS COUNTRY SO DEEPLY, AND HE HAD PASSED THAT LOVE AND PATRIOTISM ON TO HIS THREE SONS. AT THAT MOMENT, THIS SON, THIS DISTRACTED BOY FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM, BECAME ALL THAT PATRIOTIC COULD DESCRIBE IN A LIVING CIVILIAN, AND THAT FLAG BEFORE MY MOTHER'S NOW GENTLY TEAR-STREAKED FACE, CAME TO EMBODY EVERY FREEDOM, PRIVILEGE, AND PRIDE I'D EVER KNOWN. IT SYMBOLIZED MY FATHER. HIS GREAT HEART, HIS KINDNESS, HIS COURAGE, AND YES, EVEN HIS (I WAS LUCKY) OCCASIONAL HUMAN LAPSES.

YET, NOW HERE WE ARE, JUST THOSE FIVE SHORT YEARS HAVE PASSED, AND THAT SAME FLAG THAT TOOK ME SO LONG TO LOVE, RESPECT, AND PROTECT, THREATENS TO BECOME A HAUNTING BANNER OF MURDER, GREED, AND TREASON AGAINST OUR PRINCIPLES, HONORED HISTORY, CONSTITUTION, AND OUR OWN MOTHERS AND FATHERS. TO BECOME A VULGAR BILLBOARD, ADVERTISING OUR DISLOYALTY TO OURSELVES AND OUR ALLIES. OUR FOREFATHERS ENTRUSTED THAT FLAG AND WHAT IT SHOULD STAND FOR, WHETHER IN TIMES OF BLISS OR TERROR, TO OUR FATHERS AND MOTHERS. AND *THEY* HAVE ENTRUSTED IT TO US. THE RESPONSIBILITY "FOR WHICH IT STANDS" IS OURS. THAT FLAG IS MY FATHER AND I WANT HIM BACK.

IT IS MAY 2, 2003 – A GREY DAY IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. MY NOW 12-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER IS ON THE PHONE IN OUR KITCHEN ORGANIZING A MOVIE-GOING TROUPE OF FRIENDS FOR A FRIDAY EVENING SHOW. "IS CHICAGO STILL PLAYING?" THEY WANT A SECOND VIEWING. THEY WANT SONG. AND THEY WANT DANCE. MY SON IS OUTSIDE SKATEBOARDING (PERHAPS DREAMING OF THE GIRL IN THE FRONT OF THE CLASS). PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH WAS HAVING HIS BACK SLAPPED ON THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER ABRAHAM LINCOLN YESTERDAY. HE SEEMED QUITE PLEASED WITH THIS, *HIS* MILITARY SERVICE. HE LIKES IT BETTER NOW THAN HE DID WHEN HE WAS A MEMBER OF THE TEXAS NATIONAL GUARD, WHEN IN 1972, HE SIMPLY FAILED TO SHOW UP FOR DUTY FOR OVER A YEAR IN WARTIME. I CERTAINLY WOULDN'T WANT TO REMIND HIM THAT WERE HE AWOL IN A TIME OF WAR, IT WOULD AMOUNT TO TREASONOUS DESERTION. YET, BESIDE HIM, IN HIS SELF-SATISFACTION, MUCH OF OUR COUNTRY, LOSING JOBS, AND INCREASING DEBT, IS PORTRAYED AS BEING QUITE PLEASED WITH HIM, TOO. AND WHY NOT? THIS IS HIS DEBUTANTE BALL, ISN'T IT? THIS YOUNG MAN OF PRIVILEGE, WHO NEVER HAD THE CURIOSITY TO SET FOOT OUTSIDE OUR COUNTRY BEFORE BECOMING OUR PRESIDENT, WAS DRESSED IN HIS "TOP GUN" JUMPER, FLOWN IN, ONTO THE FLIGHT DECK OF THE LINCOLN. I DIDN'T NEED A SECOND VIEWING OF THIS ONE. TOM CRUISE WAS FINE BY ME. LIKE MY DAUGHTER AND HER FRIENDS, I'M IN THE MOOD FOR A LITTLE SONG AND DANCE, TOO. BUT WHILE WE SING AND WHILE WE DANCE, CAN IT BE A SONG OF HOPE? CAN WE SHARE A DRINK AMONG FRIENDS AND BE RESPONSIBLE ENOUGH NOT TO DRIVE HOME, KILLING THE CHILD OF ANOTHER WITH A RECKLESSLY DRIVEN CAR? CAN WE CONSIDER UNITED STATES' POLICY INTERNATIONALLY? CAN WE CONSIDER THAT THE AFGHANS, IRAQIS, AFRICANS, SO MANY, AND YES, EVEN HERE IN AMERICA NEED FOOD, WATER, MEDICINE, HOPE AND SWEET DREAMS? THAT ENTIRE CULTURES ARE DISINTEGRATING AND WILL BE GONE IN OUR CHILDRENS' LIFETIME. THAT THE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE IN NEED WHO MAKE UP SO MUCH OF THE WORLD, WHERE WE STAND AS THE GREATEST DEMOCRACY IN ITS HISTORY, LEAVE US TO DANCE WITH THEM IN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS, OR, TO DANCE UPON THEM, THEIR GRAVES AND THOSE OF THEIR CHILDREN.

WE ARE BEING TOLD THAT THE NEEDS OF THESE PEOPLE AND NATIONS ARE BEING MET. WE ARE BEING TOLD THAT OUR PRINCIPLES AND OUR NATION'S REWARDS ARE BEING PRESERVED AND WON FOR OUR PEOPLE. WE HAVE BEEN TOLD MANY THINGS. BUT IF WE DO NOT PARTICIPATE IN AN EDUCATED DEMOCRACY, WE PARTICIPATE IN ITS DEMISE. WE ALL HAVE DIFFERENT MEANS. BE IT A LETTER TO A CONGRESSMAN, CHARITY SUPPORT, OR A PIECE IN THE NEW YORK TIMES. BUT WHATEVER OUR MEANS, AND IMAGINATION, WE MUST SPEAK. WE MUST QUESTION. WE MUST VALUE OURSELVES, OUR INTEGRITY, OUR FAMILIES, OUR HEARTS, AND THE COUNTRY MY FATHER AND SO MANY OTHERS SERVED. AND SOON, WE MUST DO ONE MORE THING... WE MUST VOTE.

"DAD, CAN YOU DRIVE US TO THE MOVIES?" DUTY CALLS.