

Dick Cavett on War and Iraq: What My Uncle Knew About War

Tell me, are you too getting just a little bit fed up with our leader's war? Isn't everybody? Do you actually know anyone who thinks it's all going to turn out fine? Except that chubby optimist Dick Cheney, of course, who thinks the Titanic is still afloat.

And am I alone in finding our leader's behavior at press conferences irritating? I mean that smirky, frat-boy joking manner he goes into while, far away, people he dispatched to the desert are having their buttocks shot away. It's worst when he does that thing of his that the French call making a "moue"...; when he pooches his lips out and thrusts his face forward in a way that seems to say, "Aren't I right? And don't you adore me?"

As in his case, I was never a soldier, but God knows I wanted to be. Not in later years when my draft number came up for real, but back in my Nebraska grade-school days when Jimmy McConnell and Dickie Cavett watched John Wayne in "Sands of Iwo Jima" at least five times, one of us sneaking the other in free through the alley exit. Then we went home, got our weapons (high-caliber cap pistols) and took turns being John Wayne. The alley was Iwo Jima.

Years later I met Big John. It couldn't have been better. He was in full cowboy drag on an old Western (studio) street and mounted on his great horse Dollar. He looked exactly as he did in "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon", and it took my breath away. I didn't just like him, I loved him. I sorta wished I hadn't liked him quite as much, so I could have asked him, "Duke, how come not you nor any of your four strapping sons ever spent one day in the armed services? (I'm merely asking, I might have added to lighten the tone. Or delay the concussion.)".

I didn't dodge the draft, and unlike our V.P. I didn't have "a different agenda.... I didn't have to. I had mononucleosis (imagine how the "nuke-you-lur" president would injure that word in pronunciation) and, my draft board said, they had way too many guys and nothing was happening, war-wise. Sound preposterous? And yet there was such a time.

I have a statement: *Anybody who gives his life in war is an idiot.*

I guess I left off the quotation marks to let the words have their full effect. They aren't mine, but I'm related to them. They're my Uncle Bill's words, and his credentials for uttering the remark are a shade better than mine.

He may well have been the sole Marine to have survived driving landing barges on three bloody invasions in the South Pacific. I asked an old Marine vet once how rare Bill's survival was. He was gifted of speech: "I'd say survivors of what your uncle did could probably hold their reunion in a phone booth and still have room for most of Kate Smith." (We'll pause while youngsters Google.) "My guess is that your uncle is unique."

Bill said that aside from knowing that any minute was likely to be your last, the worst part of the job was having to drop the landing barge's front door so the guys could swarm out onto the beach. Despite the hail of bullets against that door, he had to drop it, knowing that the front five or six guys would be killed instantly.

The phrase Bill hated most was "gave his life." That phrase is a favorite of our windbag politicians; especially, it seems, the dimmer ones who say "Eye-rack."

"Your life isn't given," I remember him saying, "it's brutally ripped away from you. You're no good to your buddies dead, and when the bullets start pouring in you don't give a goddamn about God, country, Yale, your loved ones, the last full measure of devotion or any other of that Legionnaire patriotic crapola. You just want you and your buddies to see at least one more sunrise."

Bill also served on land and experienced something so god-awful that he thought he would go mad: "Tom [his best friend] and I were trotting along, firing our rifles, and I turned to say something to Tom and his head was gone." (Bill had great difficulty telling this. I guess I felt honored that he had not been able to speak of it for

years.) He said the worst part was that while still holding the rifle, the body, now a fountain, continued for four or five steps before falling. He hated to close his eyes at night because that ghastly horror was his dependable nightly visitor for years - like Macbeth, murdering sleep.

By sheer chance I was out on the sidewalk in front of Bill's house (we lived next door) when he arrived home from the war. I wasn't even sure it was Bill at first, he looked so much older.

I blurted, "Hey, Bill, welcome home." He was two feet from me but neither saw nor heard me. I knew the phrase current then. Bill was "shellshocked." Not the current "post-traumatic stress disorder" or whatever the P.C.-sounding phrase is today. For the first six months he was home, he slept in the yard.

You will think less of me for this, but my friend Jim and I, noticing how poor Bill jumped at sudden sounds, thought a firecracker might be in order. Bill's training kicked in by reflex. He hit the ground so fast it looked like film with frames removed. And, lacking the standard-issue shovel, he started digging with his hands. He never knew who did it. As for Jim and me, I trust that this will be deducted from our shares in paradise.

Isn't it the excellent combat chronicler Paul Fussell who gets credit for the phrase "the thousand-mile stare"? It described the look of the haggard soldiers coming back from their first battle as the eager, fresh-faced kids - which they had been a few days earlier - filed past them on their way "in." By definition, both groups were the same age, but there were no young faces in the returning group. They looked more like fathers than sons.

It amazes me that this bungled war can still be considered controversial. Who are the 28 percent anyway, who think that George W., the author of this mess, has "done a heckuva job"?

The other word Bill hated was "sacrifice." Sacrifice is something you give up in order to get something in return. What good are we getting from this monstrous error? Cooked up as it was by that infamous group of neocons (accent on last syllable) who, draft-averse themselves, were willing to inflict on the (largely unprivileged) youth of this country their crack-brained scheme for causing democracy to take root and spread like kudzu throughout that bizarre and ill-understood part of the world, the Middle East.

What service is this great country getting out of all this tragedy, other than the certainty that historians will ask in disbelief, "Was there no one to stand up to this overweening president?"

I cringe at the icky, sentimental way the president talks about what we owe to the people of plucky little Iraq. You'd think we all grew up ending our "Now I lay me down to sleep.." with ".. and please, Lord, be good to Iraq." They detest us now, along with just about everybody else. Personally, I don't give a damn what happens to Iraq, and don't think it's worth a single American life. Or any other kind. Haven't philosophers taught us the immorality of destroying something of infinite value - like a human life - in order to achieve a possible good? I guess not.

For weeks the word "cause" has rolled around in my head, attached to an elusive quote. I found it. It's from Shakespeare's "Henry V" (as distinct, I suppose, from Paris Hilton's "Henry V") and it's the part where the king, in disguise and unrecognized, sits at a fire listening to some of his men discuss the next day's battle and what it means to be fighting in a good cause. One says, "But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all, 'We died at such a place; their wives left poor behind; their children rawly left. I am afraid there are few die well that die in a battle. Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it.'"