

Washington Post glorifies US military “ruthlessness” in Iraq

By James Cogan
20 April 2005

A disturbing article by *Washington Post* journalist Steve Fainaru, published on April 13, serves to both justify and promote a colonial and homicidal mentality among American troops fighting in Iraq.

The piece, headlined “In Mosul, a Battle ‘Beyond Ruthless,’” dwells on the exploits of Sergeant First Class Domingo Ruiz, a 39-year-old US soldier who grew up in the ghettos of Brooklyn and Puerto Rico. Ruiz is part of the 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, a unit equipped with the Army’s new Stryker wheeled assault vehicle and currently on deployment in the volatile Iraqi city of Mosul.

In November, following the US assault on Fallujah, insurgents seized control of much of Mosul. The majority of the Iraqi police deserted. American troops were rushed to the area to suppress the Iraqi resistance fighters, who appear to operate with broad popular support from the large Sunni Muslim population in Mosul. Over the past several months, a bloody counter-insurgency operation has been underway to restore occupation control.

Soldiers told the *Post* that no-one was more “ruthlessly proficient at fighting the insurgents than Ruiz”. The image conveyed in the article, however, is that of an ignorant, brutalised man, whose personality matches his unit’s emblem—a “leering skull in a green beret, blood dripping from its mouth”.

Fainaru began by regaling his readers with an account of how Ruiz’s platoon ambushed a group of suspected Iraqi guerillas on March 12, as they were allegedly moving weapons from one car to another. A US sniper, on Ruiz’s order, blew apart an Iraqi man’s head with a single shot. The platoon then opened fire as the other Iraqis attempted to flee. The American troops gave the men no opportunity to surrender.

“After the ambush,” Fainaru reported, “the Americans scooped up a piece of skull and took it back to their base as evidence of the successful mission”.

According to the *Post*, “Ruiz said the decision to pick up the skull fragment and take it back to the base was a ‘sarcastic’ gesture to confirm the kill to the battalion”. His

company commander endorsed this justification of a depraved act, denying that it amounted to taking a body part as a “trophy”, which is illegal under both US military law and international law.

Ruiz, his 23-year-old platoon commander Lieutenant Colin Keating declared, “plays by the rules of Iraq, not by the rules that are written by some staff guy who’s never been on the ground”. *Post* readers were reassured that the sergeant had “never crossed the line,” presumably a reference to committing outright war crimes, “but he’ll go right up to it time and time again”.

Ruiz told the *Post*: “It’s important for my soldiers to know that we’re not going to hesitate to annihilate the enemy. A bullet coming toward you means that they want to kill you. What are you supposed to do, come back with flowers? But believe or not, you have people here that want to give them, you know, a little bag of candy.”

The actions of Ruiz that are highlighted by the article, however, do not involve fighting an enemy that is firing bullets toward either him or his unit. They involve the brutal intimidation of Iraqi civilians in order to suppress popular opposition to the US occupation.

Conduct attributed to the sergeant by the *Washington Post* included:

- * Physically intimidating a principal and threatening to close down a school where he had “heard” insurgents were meeting at night.

- * Threatening to post a sign out the front of a man’s store labelling him a supporter of terrorism—and thereby encouraging violence against him—on the grounds that Ruiz “believed” he was aiding the resistance.

The fighting in Iraq, Ruiz explains in the article, reminded him of his days as a teenage member of the Coney Island Cobras, a Brooklyn gang, when he had taken part in “turf battles” using “whatever you had in your pocket”. In other words, the mentality with which he is conducting himself is that of a street thug.

The article does not state on whose authority Ruiz was intimidating and threatening Iraqi civilians. Ruiz is, after all,

only a sergeant. The article leaves the impression, however, that he operates with the support of senior officers and enjoys the admiration of other American soldiers. The *Post* states he is “renowned among US troops in Mosul”.

Fainaru recounted that a platoon commander was transferred “just 48 hours after he tangled with Ruiz”. Did the officer disagree with the sergeant’s methods? The article does not say. It simply cites Ruiz’s ultimatum to Lieutenant Keating who took command of the platoon on February 6: “Just let me fight my war.”

The obvious question is why are the *Washington Post* and the US military—which would have vetted the contents of the article—glorifying this man? The *Post*, a media representative of decaying American liberalism, has been at the forefront of attempting to justify the invasion of Iraq on the grounds it will bring democracy. Two years into the occupation, it is trying to create a hero out of an individual who views the basic rights of ordinary Iraqis as an obstacle to winning “his” war.

The fact that Ruiz’s conduct is looked upon with approval testifies to the extent to which the US occupation is bound up with the systematic repression of the population. In the course of the military campaign to bring Iraq under control, the lives, well-being and rights of the Iraqi people are treated with utter indifference. They are being killed, bullied or dragged away to concentration camps by the likes of Ruiz in order to terrorise them into submission.

Such methods flow from the real motives of the war. The conquest of Iraq was carried out for the interests of the American ruling elite, who aspire to plunder the country’s energy resources and use it as a base to dominate the rest of the Middle East. Such ambitions inevitably generate determined opposition from Iraqis that can only be dealt with through brute force.

Numerous articles have appeared in the press—some in the *Post*—citing disillusioned and angry comments by young marines and soldiers at the Bush administration’s claims that Iraq was invaded to stop “weapons of mass destruction”, to prevent “terrorism” or to bring “liberation”. While they may not comprehend everything, many US troops understand that they and the American people were deceived. Over 1,500 Americans are dead and more than 10,000 have been wounded for these lies.

The American political establishment, however, is determined that the US cannot “cut and run”. Having invaded Iraq, the country must be subdued and a pliant American client state created, regardless of how many more Iraqi and American lives it costs. Newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* have consistently used their pages to propagandise for the continuation of the occupation. The war is presented as an accomplished fact

that cannot be changed.

The coverage of Ruiz is a particularly insidious aspect of this propaganda. It is to promote the conception, both among the military and the American people, that, whatever their attitude toward the war, it now must be won by whatever means. The ongoing resistance in Iraq, according to the logic of Sergeant Ruiz and the *Washington Post*, is because US troops are not fighting “their war” with the necessary degree of ruthlessness, or worse, are being prevented from doing so by commanders who don’t understand the “reality” of the conflict.

On October 10, 2004, Fainaru wrote another article for the *Post* headlined “For Marines, a Frustrating Fight”. Statements attributed to US marines in the piece included:

“It seems as if they [US commanders] place more value on obeying the letter of the law and sacrificing our lives than following the spirit of the law and getting the job done.”

“They [the Iraqi fighters] know our limits, but they have no limits. We can’t compete with that.”

“We feel they [US commanders] care more about Iraqi civilians than they do American soldiers.”

A month later in Fallujah, a US marine casually executed an unarmed and wounded prisoner in front of a television camera. American forces were accused of the indiscriminate bombardment of mosques and houses, of murdering civilians searching for water or attempting to escape the city and of bombing clinics to prevent Iraqi fighters receiving medical treatment. Much of the city was left in rubble.

The latest article is an indication that the *Washington Post* considers the collective punishment meted out against the people of Fallujah to be the model for counter-insurgency operations in cities and towns across Iraq. To do so, it needs men like Ruiz, who have been so brutalised by the desperate conditions of life in the US and their experiences in the American military that they approach killing another human being without feeling the slightest moral or political qualms.

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