

Right-wing ideologue Peggy Noonan welcomes US casualties in Iraq

"Some good" from bloodier war, says Wall Street Journal columnist

Bill Vann
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"We can take it," is the title of the latest column produced for the *Wall Street Journal* editorial pages on March 31 by Peggy Noonan, the former Republican White House speechwriter. What "we" are supposed to take, as the piece makes clear, is the killing of US soldiers amidst the carnage that is being unleashed on the people of Iraq.

Noonan welcomes the prospect of a significant number of American troops coming home from Iraq in body bags. She speaks not just for herself, but decisive sections of the ruling elite. They believe that such a blood sacrifice is the only way to break down public resistance to Washington's pursuit of US corporate interests around the world by means of military aggression.

Noonan's specialty is paeans to right-wing Republican politicians and vilification of their political opponents. Typical of her adulatory prose was a column assessing Bush's State of the Union address earlier this year:

"This, truly, is a good man ... there can be no doubting the depth of his seriousness and the degree to which he attempts to do what he is convinced is right and to lead his country to toward that vision of rightness.... There is a profound authenticity to him, and a fearlessness too. A steady hand on the helm in high seas, a knowledge of where we must go and why, a resolve to achieve safe harbor."

She concludes by suggesting that Bush became president by means of divine intervention rather than mob violence to halt ballot counting in Florida.

What she most admires in her fearless helmsman is his determination to put an end, once and for all, to what has long been known as the "Vietnam syndrome". This term has been used to describe the public antipathy to militarism abroad, reinforced by the deaths of more than 58,000 American soldiers in a failed decade-long intervention in Southeast Asia.

At the same time, it refers to the reaction within the military, which saw its public reputation discredited and its ranks torn by dissension during the Vietnam War. Senior

uniformed commanders, most of whom were junior officers during that war, remain wary of any US military intervention that does not enjoy strong public support and include a relatively swift and secure "exit strategy".

Bush senior—for whom Noonan crafted such sound bites as "1,000 points of light" and "Read my lips, no new taxes"—claimed to have "kicked" the Vietnam syndrome in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. But his critics on the right of the Republican Party—those who now control the Pentagon and oversee the present aggression in Iraq—criticized his ending of the ground war after the slaughter of Iraqi troops fleeing Kuwait and his decision not to conquer Iraq itself.

Noonan laments that the wars fought since Vietnam—the invasions of Grenada and Panama in the 1980s as well as the first Gulf War and the interventions in the Balkans in the 1990s—have been quick affairs with relatively few casualties.

The second war against Iraq will be different; and that, she says, is a good thing. "There is no chance that it will be easy," she writes. "Easy means fewer dead and less dread. But ... there I see some good to be gotten from the long haul."

"The world will be reminded that America still knows how to suffer," Noonan argues. "In a country as in an individual, the ability to withstand pain—the ability to suffer—says a great deal about character." The willingness of the US to sustain substantial casualties, she suggests, will serve to intimidate both "our implacable foes and sometimes doubting friends."

An elevated US death toll will benefit the country's proponents of unrestrained militarism, she adds: "Deep in the heart of many pro-invasion thinkers has been a question ... Can we still take it? It won't be bad for us to see that the answer is yes."

It will be even more salutary for the military to see its troops blooded and to lose its fear of casualties. Noonan writes: "Our armed forces, the professionals, are going to learn that they can do it. They've wondered too. They are also going to learn how to do their jobs better, because

they're really going to have to do the job. They are not going to feel when they return that they got all dressed up and the party was canceled."

Some party. How many flag-draped coffins will be coming home to Noonan's posh Upper East Side neighborhood in Manhattan? The old populist slogan, "a rich man's war, a poor man's fight," has never been truer than today.

Those who are "really going to have to do the job" of dying on the battlefield are drawn overwhelmingly from the working class and the poor. They are for the most part young people who put on a uniform as their only means of paying for a college education or getting a job.

The overwhelming majority of these "professionals" earn less in a year than Noonan—as she admitted in a confessional column last year—got paid for writing one speech extolling the virtues of deregulation. Her client was the now-bankrupt energy giant Enron, whose corrupt and socially destructive operations epitomized the criminal morality underlying what Noonan describes as the Bush administration's "vision of rightness".

In Iraq, the same morality is at work. The gangster elements who have taken charge in Washington decided that they had the military power to steal an oil-rich country and they are doing it. It is, in the final analysis, a desperate bid to overcome by means of violence the insoluble contradictions besetting the world capitalist economy and the growing social crisis at home. In the process, however, those political and social layers whose interests Noonan shares and defends intend to profit handsomely by means of military procurement deals, reconstruction contracts and exclusive rights to Iraqi oil.

And, as the administration has spelled out, Iraq is only the first step in what it envisions as a continuing campaign by US imperialism to assert its global hegemony by force of arms. A sufficient number of casualties in this first stage, according to the thinking within the right-wing circles that dominate the administration, will accustom American working people to accepting the deaths of their children in future wars, while creating a broader constituency for holding on to what Washington has stolen through military aggression.

Noonan ends her column by accusing the "antiwar left" of seeking to "exploit" the deaths of US soldiers. "The antiwar left has shown precious little interest in or compassion for members of the US armed services," she writes. "And yet you can bet the farm that they are about to discover a great warm hearted concern as the bodies of American fighters come home. The left is going to use those deaths as propaganda in their attempts to stop the war."

She is charging opponents of the war with an offense of which she herself is patently guilty: exploiting US casualties

for political aims. Those who demand an end to this criminal aggression surely have far greater compassion for the soldiers than scoundrels like Noonan, who welcome their deaths as a means of showing the world that "we can take it."

Noonan can "take it" precisely because she could care less about the rank-and-file soldiers. Few within her political and social circles know anyone who will die. The political class has become largely immune to the heartache of war. Only one member out of 535 in the US House of Representatives and Senate has a child serving in the Persian Gulf. Within the administration, there is no prominent figure with such a personal stake in the casualty reports.

The politicians and well-heeled commentators backing this war live in a different world than the poor and working class youth who are drawn into the army through what amounts to economic conscription. The distance separating Noonan's apartment in the East 90s from the homes in Bushwick, Brooklyn and Maspeth, Queens that are already mourning their dead sons may be only a few miles, but in social terms it might as well be a million.

When she and her cohorts mouth the phrase "support our troops", what they really mean is support those who are prepared to use them as cannon fodder in a war to defend the wealth and privileges of a corrupt oligarchy.

In the end, Noonan's faith that her hero Bush will accomplish what his father failed to achieve—"kicking the Vietnam syndrome"—will prove ill-founded. Opposition to wars of colonial conquest and military occupations of other peoples' lands has deep roots in the consciousness of American working people. This war will not end soon or easily. Its social implications—the diversion of vast resources needed for jobs, education and health care—combined with the growing realization that young lives have been sacrificed solely to benefit the corporate elite will ignite political upheavals that will eclipse those of the Vietnam era.



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