

Confessions of a Chickendove

In the past 100 years, so far as I know, no member of my family has died for his country or even served in the military, unless you count my father, who served briefly

in the Home Guard during World War II, and my mother's half brother, who served in the U.S. Army in Europe in the same war but was never acknowledged as part of the family.

Much the same is true of my wife's family. She had a dearly beloved uncle who was a major in the USAAF (ground staff), but other than that, zilch, unless you count—and here we are going back 150 years—her great-great grandfather, Egbert, who apparently enlisted three times in the Union Army for the sake of the signing bonus, which means, of course, that he deserted twice.

Even if there is room for frivolity here, there is none for complacency. "Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier, or not having been at sea," said Dr. Johnson. How well I know that.

Back in the 1960s, I lived in Australia and narrowly missed having to register for Vietnam. I was a few months too old for the draft, or so I gathered from the full-page ads the government placed in the newspapers. I have to admit that I did not read them with scrupulous care. There was nothing to stop me from volunteering, of course, but I preferred to engage in drunken pro-war rants at parties given by nice antiwar liberals and then to sleep it off in the safety of my suburban bed.

In 1966, an election year, the conservative prime minister, Harold Holt, campaigned on the slogan "All the way with LBJ" and won in a landslide. A little over a year later, alas, he went swimming near Melbourne and was never seen

again. Conspiracy theorists believed that the premier was a communist spy and that he'd been picked up by a Chinese midget submarine and taken off for a happy retirement in the People's Republic. I was never persuaded by this one. Nor was Holt's widow, Zara, who said, "Harry? Chinese submarine? He didn't even like Chinese cooking."

There was in any case no communist conspiracy. Holt had decided that it was in Australia's interest to be more closely allied to the United States, and he was probably right. Given my enthusiasm for that alliance, and for the war, I would

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have no right to throw a wobbly if someone were to call me a chickenhawk, even though, as an antiwar conservative, I am now a chickendove.

But what is John Bolton? It's hard to say without access to the lab reports, but one thing's for sure: he shows no sign of feeling meanly about himself. He was hot for the war in Vietnam, but decided against putting his money where his mouth is (wherever that is). "I confess I had no desire to die in a Southeast Asian rice paddy," he said, in a sentence that will live in infamy. "I considered the war in Vietnam already lost [in 1970]."

On Veterans Day, I was about as far as it is possible to be from the former U.S. ambassador to the UN. I was at dinner in

London with Captain Mark Philips, formerly of the Coldstream Guards and many times great grandson of General "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne, "who very carelessly lost the North American colonies at Saratoga, I'm afraid."

Captain Philips fought in North Africa and Italy and was wounded twice, the second time so seriously that he was unable to return to combat duty. "The war taught me this: that there is nothing sillier than killing people," he said.

I so wish, though, that I'd been able to see someone else on Veterans Day. Until this summer, I did not know anyone who had died in a war. In June, however, I heard the shocking news that Paul Mervis, a lieutenant in the Rifles, had been blown up and killed in Afghanistan.

In 2005, Paul had worked at the *London Spectator*, where I was an editor, and I'd gotten to know him. He was a modest young man with a ready, slightly unsure smile. He was very clever and well read, and I liked him a lot. He said he wanted to join the army. He was not a nerdy neocon, not at all gung-ho, but he believed he had to give something back to his country. I suggested that it would not be a good idea to enlist, but did not press the point. The chances were that he'd come to no harm.

Now he is dead. Was his death futile, like the war in Afghanistan? No. He died with honor, looking after his men, and such a death cannot be futile. But how I wish he'd not gone to war. ■

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Nuclear Bunkum

Don't panic: bin Laden's WMD are mythical, too.

By John Mueller

ACCORDING TO Defense Secretary Robert Gates, every senior government leader is kept awake at night by “the thought of a terrorist ending up with a weapon of mass destruction, especially nuclear.”

This is, I suppose, understandable. It was in 1995 that the thoughtful analyst Graham Allison declared that “in the absence of a determined program of action, we have every reason to anticipate acts of nuclear terrorism against American targets before this decade is out.” Unabashed, he maintained in an influential 2004 book that “on the current path, a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade ahead is more likely than not.” And it was on “60 Minutes,” on Nov. 14, 2004, that former CIA analyst Michael Scheuer assured his rapt interviewer that the explosion of a nuclear or dirty bomb in the United States was “probably a near thing.”

In contrast to such bold proclamations, the evidence about the degree to which al-Qaeda—the only Islamic terrorist organization that targets the U.S. homeland—has pursued, or even had much interest in, a nuclear-weapons program is limited and often ambiguous. Still, the shards that exist have been routinely parlayed and exaggerated by a parade of official and unofficial alarmists.

For example, in 2004, the 9/11 Commission insisted that “al-Qaeda has tried to acquire or make nuclear weapons for at least ten years.” The only substantial evidence it provided for this assertion comes from an episode that supposedly took place around 1993 in Sudan, when Osama bin Laden's aides were scammed

as they tried to buy some uranium. Information about this caper apparently came entirely from Jamal al-Fadl, who defected from al-Qaeda in 1996 after he had been caught stealing \$110,000 from the organization. He tried selling his story around the Middle East, but only the Americans were buying. In his prize-winning *The Looming Tower*, Lawrence Wright relays the testimony of the man who allegedly purchased the substance for bin Laden, as well as that of a Sudanese intelligence agent. Both assert that, although there were various other scams going around at the time that may have served as grist for Fadl, the uranium episode never happened.

It's possible, of course, that Fadl—a “lovable rogue” who is “fixated on money” and “likes to please,” according to an FBI debriefer—is telling the truth, or at least what he thinks is the truth. But his allegations, now endlessly repeated, have gone from a colorful story relayed by an admitted embezzler on the lam to unquestioned fact. We know, it is repeatedly declared, that bin Laden tried to purchase weapons-grade uranium in Sudan. Qualifications, even modest ones, concerning the veracity of the evidence behind that declaration have vanished in the retelling.

Various sources suggest that there were radical elements in bin Laden's entourage interested in pursuing atomic weapons or other weapons of mass destruction when the group was in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Yet the same sources indicate that bin Laden essentially sabotaged the idea by refusing to fund a WMD project or even initiate plan-

ning for one. Analyst Anne Stenersen notes that evidence from a recovered al-Qaeda computer shows that only some \$2,000 to \$4,000 was earmarked for WMD research, apparently for very crude chemical work to make biological weapons. For comparison, she points out that the millennial terrorist group Aum Shinrikyo appears to have invested \$30 million into manufacturing sarin gas.

To show al-Qaeda's desire to obtain atomic weapons, many have focused on a set of conversations that took place in Afghanistan in August 2001 between two Pakistani nuclear scientists, bin Laden, and three other al-Qaeda officials. Pakistani intelligence officers characterize the discussions as “academic.” Reports suggest that bin Laden may have had access to some radiological material—acquired for him by radical Islamists in Uzbekistan—but the scientists told him that he could not manufacture a weapon with it. Bin Laden's questions do not seem to have been very sophisticated. The scientists were incapable of providing truly helpful information because their expertise was not in bomb design but in processing fissile material, which is almost certainly beyond the capacities of a non-state group. Nonetheless, some U.S. intelligence agencies convinced themselves that the scientists provided al-Qaeda with a “blueprint” for constructing nuclear weapons.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the apparent mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks, reportedly said that al-Qaeda's atom-bomb efforts never went beyond searching the Internet. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, technical experts from the