

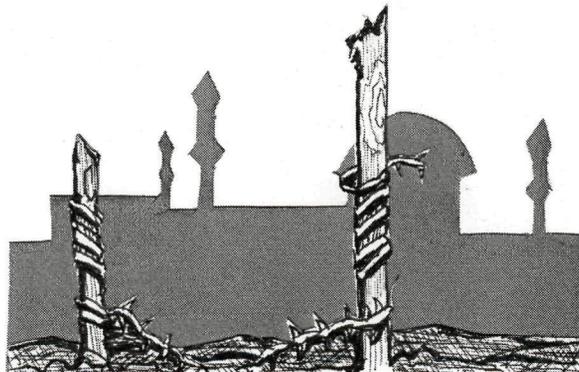
LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Jillian Jimenez, Ph.D.

Narratives are threaded through public life. They provide justification for past action as well as maps for future ones. Sometimes the stories change swiftly to accommodate facts on the ground; sometimes they override the realities they are designed to order. One might argue that this is the case with our involvement in Iraq. The initial narrative explaining our involvement there was robust with self-justification and patriotism. The need to rid the world of weapons of mass destruction seemed small vindication for the tragedy of September 11, 2001, but it was the least our leaders could do. These weapons could be used on this country and on our closest allies; the weapons were poised to exact a terrible punishment for deeds we had hardly considered deplorable, nor had we acknowledged culpability for them - the poverty and subjugation of a large part of the Arab world. But the narrative was shifted when no weapons were found. It was then necessary to re-explain to ourselves why we engaged in the Iraq conflict. Newer narratives are competing for a central place in understanding the war. Bringing freedom to an oppressed population and stopping those linked to terrorist movements in the region are beginning to emerge as tentative successors to the original compelling storyline. The justification for past actions has been trumped, however, by the need for a narrative to guide future policies. The need to rebuild the country we recently attacked seems to carry a clear appeal: we owe the people that we have hurt reparation. A realpolitik reason is more nuanced but potentially just as compelling to some: the story of Iraq can be a story of the triumph of democracy, if we act now to lay down the infrastructure necessary to support freedom.

None of these narratives can be proved or disproved, now, and perhaps not ever. (There may have been and still may be weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; it ultimately may cost billions of dollars to restore cities, towns and rural life and to prevent angry people from turning on us in the future). But since they are stories, they are largely independent of facts and research. Similar stories have evoked powerful responses in every society, as the history of wars, religious conflicts, and selfless acts of heroism reveal.

These appeals for public support of current policy directions serve as a reminder of the power of narratives in public life. While research—facts and numbers—may seem closer to the truth than do narratives, it is the latter that move people to sacrifice themselves and to test their resolve, even unto death.



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