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How goes the war? ; Two looks at Iraq, from the trenches and an Arab newsroom

James E. McWilliams,

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Civilians enjoy the luxury of contemplating warfare. Unless you're a pacifist or a war hawk, you've had fleeting moments of doubt about the situation in Iraq. You've spent time reading about, watching and debating the war in a genuine attempt to discern the merits of this morally complex cause. You've struggled to clarify where you stand, how radically and why. Perhaps you've achieved some semblance of clarity. Perhaps you've even gone so far as to put a "support the troops" magnet on the SUV, or an "Attack Iraq NO!" sticker on the Subaru. No matter what message decorates your car, you've surely endured the lump that occasionally knots your throat as you've read the names of the dead.

Then -- and here's where it really gets complicated for those of us at home -- you take the kids to the park, check your e-mail and make sure the dog has a kennel reservation for the holidays. The dramas of daily life, as they are wont to do, inevitably intervene.

Such quotidian tasks, in fact, make our forthright contemplation seem shallow, if not disingenuous. We are, after all, passing judgment on that about which we know precious little.

Our relative ignorance is hardly our fault. Reports conveyed by embedded American reporters can be riveting, but they're ultimately random snippets that don't convey the broader perspective we'd need to make informed decisions.

But two recent books that approach the war from very different angles pull us deeper into a conflict that is more complex than we might imagine.

David Zucchino's "Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad" (Grove Press, \$14) provides a nearly minute-by-minute account of the fall of Baghdad in April 2003. Zucchino, a Los Angeles Times reporter, based his reconstruction of this pivotal battle on first-hand observations and hundreds of interviews with the soldiers who fought it. It's a harrowing story.

In the short term, the soldiers triumph. In doing so, however, they lose limbs, crumble emotionally and die. Avoiding the muscular prose that often mars military history, Zucchino joins the ranks of Jon Lee Anderson and David Atkinson in providing a no-nonsense portrait of what life is like for soldiers on the ground.

The soldiers whom Zucchino portrays don't have time to ponder the Big Questions. "(Political) topics were too remote and cryptic for young men whose immediate focus was on the twin tasks of destruction and survival," Zucchino writes. Sure, they were fighting for their country, "(b)ut mostly, they were fighting to come home alive and to ensure that the men beside them came home, too."

But it must be difficult to readjust to civilian existence when, as Zucchino says of Staff Sgt. Thomas Slago, "killing people had become almost routine." Slago, like so many of his colleagues, "did not think of the Iraqis there on the roadway as people but as obstacles." As soldiers have done throughout

the history of warfare, Slago would "rationalize his feelings by dehumanizing the enemy." It's unnerving to see how easy this is to do.

Whatever enduring political point Zucchini wants to make is also squelched by the violence, logistical maneuvering and human drama that characterize urban warfare. Nevertheless, his descriptions of battle are replete with examples of intelligence failures, malfunctioning equipment and the pervasive belief -- encouraged by the top brass -- that "(o)nce Baghdad fell, the war would be over." The division that Zucchini tracked, astonishingly, "had been given no guidance for the postcombat phase, no orders for what to do with Baghdad once it was in American hands."

"Thunder Run" thus achieves a delicate balance: It presents the soldiers who fought this important battle as heroic, but the war in which they fight as deeply flawed.

While viewing a war through the eyes of those who fight it provides one critical perspective, doing so through a foreign news agency offers another. No journalistic organization has generated as much controversy as the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has inspired a cottage industry of Al-Jazeera bashers by portraying it as "violently anti-coalition."

At the heart of American antipathy towards Al-Jazeera is the fact that the agency heaped attention on anti-American sentiment in the wake of the Iraqi invasion. But as the Oxford-educated journalist Hugh Miles reminds us in "Al -Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenges America" (Grove Press, \$24), opposition to "the invasion forces" was intense.

"One of the first consequences of the war," he writes, "was a wave of protests around the Middle East." Indeed, as Arabs watching Al-Jazeera learned (and Americans watching Fox News and CNN didn't), 30,000 Yemenis protested the war after the U.S. invasion, U.S. embassies were forced to close throughout the Middle East and "in the centre of Cairo, a few thousand anti-war protesters hurled stones and debris at police while chanting slogans against America and Arab leaders whom they regarded as complicit in the war." These feelings and actions continue to rage throughout the Arab world.

Rumsfeld, for his part, deemed it obscene that "Al-Jazeera gave these (protests) solid coverage." But if Al-Jazeera -- a news organization free of state control -- had ignored them, it would have violated its role as one of the Arab world's most promising (if imperfect) examples of a free press.

Indeed, Miles presents strong evidence that Al-Jazeera practices a great deal of respectable journalism. After an analysis of its reporting on the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Afghanistan, Iraq and the second intifada, he concludes that the agency "did not favour anyone in the war." Like most residents in the Arab world, and many in America, "it opposed Saddam's regime and opposed the invasion."

Miles tends to overstate his case, perpetually touting Al- Jazeera's journalistic accomplishments without directly dispelling the charges of anti-Americanism that have been leveled against it. But in the end, his evidence legitimizes a news agency that Westerners will soon have the option of viewing 24 hours a day (an English language station is expected in the very near future).

Many Americans will continue to dismiss Al-Jazeera as nothing more than a sinister tool of the Iraqi resistance. We should be aware, however, that we do so at our own peril.

Al-Jazeera powerfully shapes and reflects what many Arabs feel about the United States, both influencing and lending unprecedented insight into the Iraqis who support and violently oppose "Operation Iraqi Freedom." We may not always like what Al-Jazeera says. But given that today the Iraqi people -- many of them Al-Jazeera watchers -- will go to the polls, its relevance is beyond dispute.

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