

The Unfeeling President

by E.L. Doctorow

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I fault this president for not knowing what death is. He does not suffer the death of our 21-year-olds who wanted to be what they could be. On the eve of D-Day in 1944 General Eisenhower prayed to God for the lives of the young soldiers he knew were going to die. He knew what death was. Even in a justifiable war, a war not of choice but of necessity, a war of survival, the cost was almost more than Eisenhower could bear.

But this president does not know what death is. He hasn't the mind for it. You see him joking with the press, peering under the table for the weapons of mass destruction he can't seem to find, you see him at rallies strutting up to the stage in shirt sleeves to the roar of the carefully screened crowd, smiling and waving, triumphal, a he-man.

He does not mourn. He doesn't understand why he should mourn. He is satisfied during the course of a speech written for him to look solemn for a moment and speak of the brave young Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

But you study him, you look into his eyes and know he dissembles an emotion which he does not feel in the depths of his being because he has no capacity for it. He does not feel a personal responsibility for the 1,000 dead young men and women who wanted to be what they could be.

They come to his desk not as youngsters with mothers and fathers or wives and children who will suffer to the end of their days a terribly torn fabric of familial relationships and the inconsolable remembrance of aborted life . . . they come to his desk as a political liability, which is why the press is not permitted to photograph the arrival of their coffins from Iraq.

How then can he mourn? To mourn is to express regret and he regrets nothing. He does not regret that his reason for going to war was, as he knew, unsubstantiated by the facts. He does not regret that his bungled plan for the war's aftermath has made of his mission-accomplished a disaster. He does not regret that, rather than controlling terrorism, his war in Iraq has licensed it. So he never mourns for the dead and crippled youngsters who have fought this war of his choice.

He wanted to go to war and he did. He had not the mind to perceive the costs of war, or to listen to those who knew those costs. He did not understand that you do not go to war when it is one of the options but when it is the only option; you go not because you want to but because you have to.

Yet this president knew it would be difficult for Americans not to cheer the overthrow of a foreign dictator. He knew that much. This president and his supporters would seem to have a mind for only one thing -- to take power, to remain in power, and to use that power for the sake of themselves and their friends.

A war will do that as well as anything. You become a wartime leader. The country gets behind you. Dissent becomes inappropriate. And so he does not drop to his knees, he is not contrite, he does not sit in the church with the grieving parents and wives and children. He is the president who does not feel. He does not feel for the families of the dead, he does not feel for the 35 million of us who live in poverty, he does not feel for the 40 percent who cannot afford health insurance, he does not feel for the miners whose lungs are turning black or for the working people he has deprived of the chance to work overtime at time-and-a-half to pay their bills - it is amazing for how many people in this country this president does not feel.

But he will dissemble feeling. He will say in all sincerity he is relieving the wealthiest 1 percent of the population of their tax burden for the sake of the rest of us, and that he is polluting the air we breathe for the sake of our economy, and that he is decreasing the quality of air in coal mines to save the coal miners' jobs, and that he is depriving workers of their time-and-a-half benefits for overtime because this is actually a way to honor them by raising them into the professional class.

And this litany of lies he will versify with reverences for God and the flag and democracy, when just what he and his party are doing to our democracy is choking the life out of it.

But there is one more terribly sad thing about all of this. I remember the millions of people here and around the world who marched against the war. It was extraordinary, that spontaneous aroused oversoul of alarm and protest that transcended national borders. Why did it happen? After all, this was not the only war anyone had ever seen coming. There are little wars all over the world most of the time.

But the cry of protest was the appalled understanding of millions of people that America was ceding its role as the last best hope of mankind. It was their perception that the classic archetype of democracy was morphing into a rogue nation. The greatest democratic republic in history was turning its back on the future, using its extraordinary power and standing not to advance the ideal of a concordance of civilizations but to endorse the kind of tribal combat that originated with the Neanderthals, a people, now extinct, who could imagine ensuring their survival by no other means than pre-emptive war.

The president we get is the country we get. With each president the nation is conformed spiritually. He is the artificer of our malleable national soul. He proposes not only the laws but the kinds of lawlessness that govern our lives and invoke our responses. The people he appoints are cast in his image. The trouble they get into and get us into, is his characteristic trouble.

Finally, the media amplify his character into our moral weather report. He becomes the face of our sky, the conditions that prevail. How can we sustain ourselves as the United States of America given the stupid and ineffective warmaking, the constitutionally insensitive lawgiving, and the monarchical economics of this president? He cannot mourn but is a figure of such moral vacancy as to make us mourn for ourselves.

E. L. Doctorow is an American novelist. His works are noted for their mingling of American history and literary imagination through the interaction of fictional and real-life characters.

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