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INTERVIEWS**IN THE LINE OF FIRE**

Journalist Robert D. Kaplan joined U.S. Marines as they stormed Fallujah, and returned to share his impressions

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When *The Atlantic Monthly's* correspondent Robert D. Kaplan signed on this spring as an embedded journalist in Iraq, he had no way of knowing what the experience would bring. Given that the war had been declared officially over for months, and that the Marine battalion to which he was assigned had been charged with "security and stability operations," it seemed likely that he would be filing a report on the military's nation-building efforts. As it happened, however, the course his battalion charted from Kuwait to central Iraq landed him in the Sunni Triangle just weeks before four American contractors were murdered and publicly mutilated inside Fallujah. Word came down the chain of command almost immediately; his battalion would be assaulting the city.

When the troops set out at 1 a.m. on April 5 to attack the city, Kaplan went with them. In "Five Days in Fallujah," the article he later filed for *The Atlantic*, Kaplan describes his experiences there, and offers insight into the culture and operating style of the Marines, as well as thoughts on the larger picture of the military situation in Iraq.

Before the call to arms came, he had felt a strong sense of kinship with these fighting men; like him "they had soft spots, they got sick, they complained." But differences announced themselves as soon as the battle preparations began. Kaplan was struck first by their strict adherence to hierarchy—what he refers to as "the incontestability of command." Whenever the most senior officer present in a given planning session made a decision, there was no further argument or discussion; deliberations simply moved efficiently on to the next matter at hand. Kaplan also became keenly aware of the pervasiveness of Christian religious sentiment among the troops. "The spirit of the U.S. military is fiercely evangelical," he writes, "even as it is fiercely ecumenical." Indeed, a few hours before the scheduled attack, a military chaplain issued a blessing in which he reminded them that it was Palm Sunday and referred to the task at hand as "a spiritual battle" and to the Marines themselves as "tools of mercy." The most stark reminder of the difference between himself and the men among whom he was embedded, however, didn't come until they were in the thick of battle. On the second night of the operation, Kaplan was with a group that had penetrated far into the city when it began to take enemy fire. Kaplan struggled to suppress his own natural instinct to flee. To his amazement, his companions ran straight toward the gunfire.

Smith [the company commander] did not have to order his Marines straight into the direction of the fire; it was a collective impulse—a phenomenon I would see again and again over the coming days. The idea that Marines are trained to break down doors, to seize beachheads and other territory, was an abstraction until I was there to experience it. Running into fire rather than seeking cover from it goes counter to every human survival instinct—trust me ... In one flash, as we charged across [the street] amid whistling incoming shots, I realized that they were not like me; they were Marines.

Even as he was impressed by the caliber of the men he was with, however, Kaplan was dismayed by what he perceived as a larger-scale failure of military planning. The assault on Fallujah, he noted, was beautifully orchestrated down to the last detail. But he felt that there should have been more troops there in the first place. Somehow the proper order of things had been reversed, with too few fighters out in the

trenches, and too many military bureaucrats crammed into Baghdad. He contrasted the Baghdad U.S. military headquarters, on the one hand, where he had seen a crowd of soldiers in the dining hall "choosing different kinds of fine cakes for dessert," with the Iraqi countryside where he had observed "barely a U.S. presence."

Most worrisome of all, Kaplan suggests, is the fact that Operation Iraqi Freedom has been declared complete and that in some quarters there is talk of withdrawal. In fact, he argues, the only reason it appeared such an easy victory is because it is so very *incomplete* and because so much yet remains to be accomplished. "Americans want clean end states and victory parades," he writes. "But imperialism is about never-ending involvement."

Robert D. Kaplan is the author of many books, including *Mediterranean Winter* (2004), *Warrior Politics* (2001), *The Coming Anarchy* (2000), *Eastward to Tartary* (2000), and *The Arabists* (1993). He is writing a series of articles about U.S. troops around the world.

We corresponded recently by email.

—Sage Stossel

As you traveled with the Marines from Kuwait to Fallujah, how much interaction did you have with Iraq's people and culture? Did you get a sense of how Iraqis in different areas feel about the presence of American forces?

The journey to central Iraq was a grueling, three-day affair where I was able to get a sense of Iraq's visual panorama but not its public attitudes. Those came later, when we were doing foot patrols for several weeks in urban and rural areas of the Sunni triangle, before the Fallujah business started. The Iraqis were not shy about sharing their views with Marines, who regularly jumped off their vehicles and engaged them one-on-one. The Iraqis I met while I was with the Marines were angry about the lack of basic utilities, were craving jobs, and were terrified about a surge in crime—particularly car-jackings. They were very dependent on tribal sheikhs for dealing with these things, because the new democratic institutions the Americans are trying to get started still have insufficient legitimacy. Iraqis can't understand how a country can overthrow their hated dictator, but can't get the water running. Marine civil affairs officers are working with traditional sheikhs and others to improve the situation. The Marines aren't discouraged—they're working on these issues with real fervor.

How did the Marines among whom you were embedded respond to your presence in the battalion?

The particular Marine grunts with whom I was embedded had the impression at first that journalists are violent people. I'm not kidding. After all, two reporters who had been embedded with them in 2003 during the war had gotten into a fistfight over a satellite phone, and a Marine captain had had to break it up with a body block. Aside from that, it was a typical situation for me. I've had long embedding experiences before with the Army Special Forces and the Marines. In the first few days you go through a sniff test, where the guys try to figure out whether you're an asshole or not. Once you're pronounced okay, the bonding can get intense. I email all the time with soldiers and Marines I've met in my travels. If you spend several weeks in close quarters with a bunch of guys under awful conditions, there is something deeply wrong with you if you don't make fast friends. Whereas Army Special Forces guys are in their thirties, Marines are a decade younger, so that makes it a bit more challenging for someone in his early fifties like me. The trick is to ask them nuts-and-bolts questions about what they do, not about how they feel. Profound, touchy-feely questions get you nowhere.

You write that at a planning session for the Fallujah attack "it suddenly dawned on everyone inside the room that [what they were about to do] represented the opposite of what the Marines had come to Iraq to do. Instead of nation-building ... they were about to lead a theater-level attack on a large urban area." Did you get a sense that the Marines' response to that realization was

mostly one of disappointment? Exhilaration about the opportunity to experience combat? Apprehension?

The Marines were ready for nation building—what they call Stability and Security Operations, because that's part of the Marine Corps' small-war tradition of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But combat is what the Corps is ultimately about. Why volunteer for the Marines if you're never going to fight? So they were exhilarated, and maybe a bit nervous—nervous, that is, about doing their jobs right.

What was your own reaction upon learning that you would be a direct witness to a major combat operation?

It wasn't clear ahead of time how violent it would be. Nobody knew whether or not the insurgents would just melt away the moment we entered the city. The firefights I ended up in the middle of didn't occur until the second day of our incursion. And once the bullets started flying, it was too late to be nervous. You just react.

Were you scribbling into a notepad in the midst of all this? Did you carry a weapon? Recognizing in retrospect how much danger you were in, is this something you would think twice about doing again?

I never carried a weapon, though it's fun to go to the range and fire rifles and pistols with the troops. (The most fun I've had with weapons was in Afghanistan when I got to shoot a hundred-year-old short magazine British Lee-Enfield. It was a real history lesson. It was amazing how accurate it was given its age.) In Iraq I was always taking notes. In a way, reporters are like troops. The bravery of troops is a matter of professionalism—they're too busy doing their tasks to be afraid. For a reporter, even in the midst of a firefight, you're so concerned about forgetting to write something down or leaving a thought or impression incomplete in your notebook, that you don't think about fear. Another factor alleviating fear is the company. I simply cannot express what a wonderful bunch of people most Marines and Army Special Forces are. You tend to be afraid more when you're alone. I felt much more tense when I was alone inside a radical madrassa in Karachi a few years ago than I ever did in Fallujah with the Marines. So yeah, I hope to do it again and again.

What do you think are the most important insights you were able to gain by reporting directly at the scene as opposed to analyzing the situation from afar?

I saw how complex combat is, how collateral civilian damage can happen so easily, how it takes place when men are deprived of sleep and food. I learned intimately how thirty-year-old infantry captains display incredible executive decision-making skills. I learned how policymakers are at the mercy of the professionalism of young Marines and soldiers. I also learned how matter-of-fact combat becomes. Once the shooting starts, casualties start occurring, and you can't stop and reflect: there are too many other pressing issues. When a 2nd lieutenant and a staff sergeant were both killed, a platoon had suddenly lost its leaders. A corporal stepped in to command. Nobody had time to think about the loss until later.

Some critics have argued that the U.S. military today is overly rigid and unwieldy—overburdened by bureaucracy and methodical planning, when in fact what is most often called for in contemporary combat situations is agility, adaptability, and the ability to make spur-of-the-moment decisions. You describe the planning process for the attack on Fallujah as incredibly detailed and complex—"like writing and performing a symphony." Was it your impression that that level of elaborate planning was warranted? Overall, was it your sense that the Marines' organizational structure was effective?

I'm one of those critics. The United States won two world wars and fought magnificently in Korea using a mass infantry Army. The way those wars were fought has largely determined the conventional organizational structure our military has today. But now we're fighting a worldwide counterinsurgency, and there's more to be learned from our experiences in places such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, and the

Philippines. Change is underway, but it's slow and can't be the process of one administration. You don't change the personality of any business overnight, let alone an Industrial Age beast like the Pentagon. And of course, you don't want to overturn the whole structure either. Iraq, for example, is a war where both conventional and unconventional approaches are required. We could use more conventional troops, for example, in parts of the south, and along the main supply routes.

As for the Marines' Fallujah planning, it was warranted because, even though it was urban combat, it was actually a rather conventional situation. The Marines planned for almost everything. Plans have to be changed radically once the fighting starts, of course. But the more planning you do beforehand, the more situational awareness you have that allows for the best kind of agile thinking afterwards.

During the 1980s you spent time among the Islamic holy warriors (*mujahideen*) in Afghanistan as they battled the Soviets. How did your experiences there compare with your more recent travels with the U.S. Marines? Were the dangers you were exposed to and the privations you endured in Afghanistan similar to what you dealt with in Iraq? How did the two very different kinds of fighting groups compare?

Traveling with the *muj* was much rougher. The food was awful and the relationships were somewhat stilted because of the language difficulty. By contrast, I never saw staying with the Marines as work: it was always fun. But I think the Marines could benefit in some ways by becoming more like the Afghan warriors. I believe our military future will consist of a mixture of high-tech warfare and radical low-tech unconventional warfare, which will require the ability to live off the earth like the nineteenth-century Apaches. Iraq was one of the last classic infantry wars. The Special Ops branches of the various services will dominate the future.

You describe the Marines as having a strong religious streak, which gives them "a stark belief in their own righteousness and in the iniquity of the enemy," but which also inspires them to show "compassion for innocent civilians." Given how difficult it seems to be in Iraq to sort out the troublemakers from the innocent bystanders, did the Marines have trouble determining which attitude they should take toward the Iraqis they encountered?

All the time. But the way you show compassion without needlessly putting yourself at risk is through professionalism and strict adherence to Rules of Engagement. If someone has a weapon in a hostile situation you can shoot; if not, you can't. When you detain a group of people you separate them so that they can't coordinate their stories. Beyond that you don't mistreat them, unless there's a specific purpose for the harsh treatment, and even then the treatment has to be very controlled. What I'm saying is that there is no inherent contradiction between humanitarianism and tough, controlled measures meted out to High Value Targets.

You observe that Iraqis tend to be responsive to strong shows of force—"the chieftain mentality," you write, "is particularly prevalent" in Iraq. Does that suggest to you that the U.S. military in Iraq should be focusing more on displays of power than on displays of kindness and cultural sensitivity? (How effective are gestures like having U.S. troops in Iraq grow moustaches?)

The moustaches were very effective, according to what Iraqis told me. The Marines made it quite clear to the Fallujah insurgents in the first days there how tough they were. And the Army has been displaying the same kind of toughness in the Shiite south. But toughness and cultural sensitivity can go hand in hand. As General Jim Mattis, commander of the 1st Marine Division, says about his Marines in regards to the Iraqis: "No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy."

After the assault on Fallujah the Marines ultimately ended up handing the city over to the "Fallujah Brigade," an Iraqi force charged with keeping order and rooting out the insurgents. How effective do you think the Iraqi unit is likely to be? Do you think turning Fallujah over to the Iraqis was the right decision?

No. Masked gunmen are now in control of the place, according to *The Washington Post*. Marines had a victory stolen from them because of policy incoherence at the highest levels of our government. Still, the Marines have been accomplishing a lot since they left Fallujah. They've gone some way toward pacifying Al-Karmah, which is a major town strategically located between Baghdad and Fallujah, and one of the most hostile in the Sunni triangle. They've also been engaged in mortar mitigation. If mortars continue to rain on American bases in Iraq to the degree that they have, it may only be a matter of time before a 1983 Beirut style incident occurs, in which 241 servicemen were killed. So it's not as if they haven't spent the time usefully. In any case, even Fallujah is somewhat of a sideshow compared to the Shiite holy cities of the south. We can afford to make compromises of convenience in the Sunni triangle that we can't in the south. If we lose the south, we lose the war. And it's impossible for the U.S. to be any more aggressive in the south than it already has.

You describe much of the strategic planning for the Marines' attack on Fallujah as having been undertaken at the Abu Ghraib Combat Operations Center. Since then, the problem of detainee abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison has emerged as a major scandal. At the time you were there, did you have any inkling of what was going on?

The Abu Ghraib Combat Operations Center, at the Abu Ghraib Forward Operating Base, is a completely different place from the Abu Ghraib prison, which is some miles away. I did visit the prison a few times, however. A good part of the prison grounds is not a prison at all, but a base

for Marines who help the Army's 1st Cavalry patrol the town of Abu Ghraib, which is one of the most crime beset in Iraq. The Marines I was with had no contact with the prisoners. They were told in no uncertain terms by their commanders that they shouldn't. I did see some of the living quarters where the Army units who did have contact with the prisoners lived. They had been defaced by soldiers' graffiti, and there was garbage and old food lying all around. A Marine commander ordered the place whitewashed before any Marines moved in, intimating that you can tell the character of troops by the way they live. He then berated what he called "the non-infantry part of the Army." His point was that the Army has great fighting divisions with real esprit de corps, like the 82nd Airborne, 10th Mountain, 1st Cavalry, etc. But the Army is vast, and there are all these units that fall between the cracks, like those later implicated in the prison scandal, which at the time we had little inkling of.

From the archives:

"The Lessons of Abu Ghraib"
(July/August 2004)

One shocking thing about the photographs is that for some people they weren't shocking. By Mark Bowden.

How do you anticipate the June 30 handover will affect the situation for the Marines?

I don't think that the June 30 handover is going to make all that much of a difference in terms of the standard operating procedures for the troops on the ground. In terms of the security function they're performing, they're going to go right ahead doing it—they're not going to stop patrolling, and they're not going to stop hunting down people who fire mortars at the bases. Obviously there will be changes, but in terms of the troops on the ground, it will probably be more symbolic than anything.

In "[A Post-Saddam Scenario](#)," your article in the November, 2002, *Atlantic*, you expressed optimism that a U.S. invasion of Iraq could change the dynamics of the region for the better—perhaps chastening Iran and Syria into more moderate stances. "The real question," you wrote, "is not whether the American military can topple Saddam's regime but whether the American public has the stomach for imperial involvement of a kind we have not known since the United States occupied Germany and Japan." Has your thinking on these matters changed since the ousting of Saddam? Are you primarily concerned that America's resolve will falter before it can follow through to the point where the benefits of U.S. influence in the area can be realized?

In that article I also warned against any evangelical lust to impose democracy in a society with little tradition of it. Indeed, Iraq is being held together not by any Western-imported democratic governing councils, but by the blood ties of tribe and clan. Given the chaotic situation, the public's stomach for continued involvement will be crucial, so that when the troops do leave Iraq, they can leave behind a

functioning governing structure. With a supportive home front in America, countries like Iran may kick and scream at our ruthlessness and staying power, but privately they will seek deals with the United States. At the moment I'm pessimistic less about the public than because the President—despite his May 24 speech on the subject—has yet to articulate a coherent way out of the anarchy that's plaguing significant parts of Iraq.

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