



The luck of the draw had us in the same exit row from Atlanta to Savannah on July 10: I, returning from a business meeting in Denver highlighted by an astounding Gypsy Kings concert at Red Rocks, and he, a soldier returning home after his fourth tour in Iraq.

I'll call him Sergeant T, to protect his name, and I'll tell you he's in the National Guard of a state neighboring ours. He's 54, a grandfather, studiously bespectacled; a man with a contagious laugh and a view of America somehow both hardened and softened by being (what he called) "in theater" for so long and so often. He says he'd go back in an instant and expects it'll be Afghanistan when he's next called up.

He's moved fuel tankers and weapons convoys through the worst parts of Iraq. He's watched his brothers-in-arms blown up by IEDs. His stance is almost nonchalant. "You can't think about it; it'll just give you an ulcer," he says. It's the soldier's understanding that "if it's your time; it's your time".

Sergeant T enjoyed his last rotation the most because he and his squad have been giving construction training and assistance to Iraqis. He speaks fondly of a 75 year old architect he's been working with, and of Ibrahim, a younger man who's his liaison. But, he laments, "The best and the brightest have left – for Jordan, for Dubai, for wherever their education can get them a great job. They're no different from us in that regard," He adds: "They want to raise their kids and enjoy life." But, as he explains it, it's not just the poverty. ("So many people still live in mud huts, tend their goats or cattle and can hardly eek out a living.") It's the religious and tribal elder conflicts between Sunni and Shia; between village Sheiks (leaders) that make it almost impossible, in his view, for things to change much. He explains how, outside the Green Zone, there's rarely electric power on any night. While no fan of Saddam Hussein, he thinks that Iraq won't become a democracy (as we define it) but, that with an enlightened leader and a force strong enough to stop the religious fighting, the country could succeed.

He doesn't feel our energy is being wasted there but, with a delicacy of approach and a wisdom and understanding that could only be born of being there and under fire, he asks – paraphrasing the great quote from Santayana that those “who forget history are doomed to repeat it” – if we will leave Iraq without establishing democracy and if we will end up, as was the case with the Russians, leaving Afghanistan with the mission far from accomplished.

He sees (as do I) a great naiveté in the lack of understanding the West has of these very different foreign cultures. They can't see things through our prism any better than we can see things through theirs.

So, here for our leaders, is a suggestion not from Sergeant T but from me, because I listened to him: You will probably be wiser to talk to your soldiers in the field and, at that, not to your Generals, but to those doing the heavy lifting; they understand what's going on.

You would probably be smarter to talk to them than to all the analysts at the Department of State, and you would be smartest and wisest to listen to Sergeant T who said, and I paraphrase, “All I want to do is to be part of something that helps these people get a chance at the pursuit of happiness. We can't give them freedom but we can help them have a chance at pursuing happiness.” He quotes Thomas Jefferson as easily as I imagine he could quote the uniform code of conduct.

I arrived home, inspired by this one soldier, and found this from Jefferson's writings:

"The last hope of human liberty in this world rests on us. We ought, for so dear a state, to sacrifice every attachment and every enmity." Sergeant T had no “enmity”. He's the living, breathing essence of what is best about us because all he wants is for good to come from what he does on our behalf.

He and I were the last two off the plane. As we emerged into the gate area the 100 or so people waiting to board the plane burst into thunderous applause. I slowed down so Sergeant T could walk alone and accept what he deserved.

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