

## BOOK REVIEW

Blinded by  
the rockets'  
red glare

Things Worth Fighting For

Collected Writings

By Michael Kelly

THE PENGUIN PRESS; 426 PAGES; \$26.95

Reviewed by Stephen Hendricks

Washington Post columnist and Atlantic Monthly editor Michael Kelly was embedded in the 3rd Infantry Division in April 2003 when his humvee drove into a canal and made him the first journalist to die in the second Gulf War. This album of reportage, deft and maddening, is a requiem for the man and his politics.

It is not an even read. Cheap cultural rants on such villainies as lip rings abut thoughtful narratives with near-perfect moments, as when Ted Kennedy's "Chiclet teeth" are described as "the color of old piano keys." The tone throughout is Potomac Brahmin. Kelly's otherwise shrewd portrait of Jesse Jackson, for example, admits that the poor who follow Jackson have reason for rage, yet demands that "the good Jesse," preacher of healing, elbow out "the bad Jesse," preacher of class-warfare. The words "house Negro" and "field Negro" aren't in the piece, but the plantation sentiment is unmistakable.

The meat of the book, though, is Kelly's war correspondence. His career was bookended by the Gulf wars, whence his phrase "Things Worth Fighting For." A truer title might have been "Things Worth Bombing Poor Countries For," and I mean that only half-facetiously. For Kelly knew that there are things worth bombing poor (and, in theory, rich) countries for. The urgent question is: What?



DINA RUDICK / Associated Press

**Michael Kelly** died in Gulf War II.

Kelly's opinion of war was formed in Baghdad during Gulf I and remained unchanged. He wrote in 1991 of the "incandescent hysteria and beauty" of anti-aircraft fire, "the tracer shells tracking lovely curves, and S's and parabolas of orange-red light against the backdrop of a blacked-out city skyline." The shells had "a pleasingly deliberate, almost lazy look. You could see the tracers hit their apogee and then explode in delicate bright white starbursts, like the better sort of fireworks."

This kind of romanticizing exasperates leftists, but Kelly is right as far as he goes: There can be beauty in the rockets' red glare. Trouble is, Kelly shows only part of what those rockets are crashing into. On the bombing of Iraq's defense ministry, he wrote, "In ten minutes the heart and symbol of Iraq's armed forces was a burning rubble. The hospital next to it, though, was untouched, and so were the homes crowded around it."

No doubt true, but practically all of his dispatches are similar. A precise American military weapon destroys buildings, perhaps Iraqi soldiers, but never hospitals, schools, market stalls, apartment blocks. You'd never know 5,000 to 50,000 civilians died in Gulf I. And that, one suspects, is the

point. It may be art to find beauty amid carnage, but ignore the carnage altogether and you have propaganda.

It is not that Kelly is blind to human torment. His telling of the Saddamites' torture of Kuwaitis is as horrific as any Auschwitz story and underscores the good that came from liberating the emirate. And here he is on the battle-fallen: "Because, I suppose, the skin had gotten so tough and leathery from ten days in the sun, the dogs had eaten the legs from the inside out, and the epidermis lay in collapsed and hairy folds, like leg-shaped blankets, with feet attached." Strong stuff and rightly told. But this dead Iraqi, Kelly is at pains to note, and others nearby "were all soldiers . . . heavily laden with weapons and ammunition." The qualifier is important. It completes the picture of Kuwaitis brutalized, their Iraqi tormenters getting theirs, and a benign American dispensing the justice.

Only in the briefest of passages does Kelly admit a price. ("There is every reason to think," he wrote of 2003, "that the victory would come at the cost of few — likely hundreds, not thousands — Iraqi and American lives.") Never does he lend his gifts to an Iraqi civilian killed by U.S. fire, nor can he admit we perhaps rescued a few thousand tortured Kuwaitis for the sake of the oil beneath them while 800,000 Rwandans on less valuable ground were butchered with barely a shrug from Washington.

This is maddening not because it is hawkish — there is, after all, a case even for wars that enrich Texaco — but because Kelly never makes that case. An honest hawk would have acknowledged the good and evil of Gulfs I and II and explained how the good trumped the evil. Kelly simply ignored the evil. In his world, G.W. Bush never lied in linking Saddam to bin Laden and to weapons of mass destruction. Nor was the United States setting a (possibly disastrous) precedent in unilateral war-making. We were merely liberating Iraqis.

It is the "merely" that damns Kelly's reporting. If propaganda requires anything, it is that we not ask the immense question of what, precisely, is worth fighting for. Kelly let the question lie. As the media now so appallingly tell us, he was not alone. ■

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