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The Deserter’s Tale: The Story of an Ordinary Soldier Who Walked Away from the War in Iraq

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The 1980s saw the first true conflict between Islamic fundamentalists and a major power, the ten-year war waged by the mujahideen in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion. The Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, having suffered an unexpected drubbing. Emboldened by their victory against one superpower, many mujahideen, under the spiritual leadership of Osama Bin Laden (who spent some time in Afghanistan during the war), turned to fighting the new threat to Islam posed by the United States. The organization formed from disparate jihadist groups in Egypt, Iran, and Pakistan to meet this task was one whose name would become synonymous with the most violent form of anti-American Islamic fundamentalism—al-Qa’ida (the Base). Ironically, it was the United States that, through the CIA, had largely financed and equipped the mujahideen and other anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

The Looming Tower is truly a book for our time. The New York Times agrees; it selected it as one of the ten best books of 2006. Drawing upon expertise gained from living and teaching in the Middle East, Wright has written a succinct and engaging work on the history, religion, and temperament of a people who remain at best enigmatic to most Americans. More importantly, Wright’s narrative characterizes the path to September 11th as a lengthy and convoluted one, a journey that started long ago. The attacks on that day were the next step in an irrevocable conflict between elements of radical Islam and the country they saw as a threat to their existence.

The lessons of The Looming Tower are many. The United States can succeed in its fight against the radicals of Islam only if it is completely united, with all internal barriers swept aside. Much has been done in the years since that clear, blue Tuesday morning in September to reconcile that environment. The other take-away is that Bin Laden and his ilk are more complex than their rhetoric would have us believe. His followers, however, see him as a devout Muslim, pure in thought and strident in deed, out to defend his faith from foreign influences bent on its destruction. So as long as the United States remains engaged in that vital region, his likes will remain ever present and ever the threat.

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Joshua Key is a young married man with four children who joined the U.S. Army to escape the grinding poverty of his life in Guthrie, Oklahoma. In 2003, he was deployed to Iraq with the 43rd Combat Engineer Company. At the end of seven months, Key had become so disillusioned with the Army and the Iraq war that he deserted while on leave in the United States. He ultimately made his way to Canada to ask for asylum. Lawrence Hill, a Canadian writer and journalist, put Key’s story into coherent form.

Although the book is well written, it is actually hard to read, because of the U.S. Army’s allegations of Key’s disloyalty, dishonesty, disrespect, selfishness, dishonor, lack of integrity, and cowardice, particularly during his first deployment with the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment.
Regiment to Iraq. Also, like others who have served for many years in the military, I find it tough to read about the wrong-headed thinking and excuses of a deserter.

Yet this is a book that we must read, if for no other reason than not to allow Private Key’s allegations to go unanswered. Consider, for example, that this book sells in Costco’s and is listed as one of its best sellers.

Is Joshua Key a weak man who was pressured by his wife to desert, exaggerating or lying outright about his experience in Iraq to justify his desertion and gain sympathy from the Canadian authorities? Or is Private Key a naive, trusting, moral man who could no longer stomach participation in a constant series of immoral, unethical, and sometimes illegal acts in Iraq? These are the questions that many may ask themselves when reading this book. Further, as a result of this work these troublesome allegations now reside in the public domain. The Army should determine the truth. The outcome will determine if the allegations are to be refuted or if serious soul-searching and significant changes in Army culture, training, and leadership must be pursued.

The Deserter’s Tale does a credible job explaining Joshua Key’s action, and it provides some serious food for thought about how the United States has been selecting, training, and leading its soldiers. However, unfortunately, the book fails to provide a good reason for Private Key’s act of desertion.

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