

What is the Purpose?

A mother responds to her soldier daughter's desperation.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Sara Rich, MSW, was one of the speakers at the Take Back Our America rally March 18 at the Federal Building. Below is her talk, edited for length.

We received the date for my daughter's redeployment to Iraq nine months before her entitled 18-month stabilization time. Her commanding officer forced her waiver of her rights to stabilization time between deployments and gave her a date 11 months after she returned from Iraq the first time. Two weeks later she got her readiness papers. Six months after she hopefully returned from Iraq the second time, she was scheduled to go over for yet another year. Three deployments to Iraq in less than four years.

Our hearts were heavy. Three days before her actual redeployment she was packed and ready to go, she had her car keys in her hand and turned to me and said, "I don't think I can do this." I was shocked but knew any type of coercion on my part would not help, so I said, "Are you serious?" She replied, "I just can't do it, Mom." She could not go back there to the misery – where nobody cares whether you live or die as long as you do what you are told, and they look good afterwards.

Nor could she handle another deployment dealing with the daily hour-to-hour sexual harassment that she endured from 99 percent of her male officers and fellow soldiers. The isolation and fear of being attacked, harassed, molested and raped was a huge part of her life in Iraq. She was always full of anxiety and stress just keeping herself safe when her commanding officers would show up banging on her door in the middle of the night intoxicated and wanting to have sex with her.

The intimidation and sexual harassment that our female soldiers are enduring is leading to massive stress, and in some cases even death, for our military women in Iraq. They are not supported but shamed when they bring these incidents to the attention of their superiors.

I told her either way she is my hero and I will support her. She decided that she was going to go AWOL and leave the Army.

That the U.S. is in Iraq for something that is pointless was a common feeling for many of the soldiers she was stationed with, she explained. The U.S. is not the world police. Why can't we focus on the multiple crises we have in our own country? The hurricanes that took thousands of lives? It is abominable that we are sending our troops over there and paying them a pittance. The average soldier who is married and has a family to support gets about \$2,000 a month, and at the same time we are sending contractors from Blackwater over to do the same security jobs and paying them \$15,000 a month to be there and risk *their* lives. This makes no sense to our soldiers.

She kept asking, and now I'm asking you: What is the purpose? This is an outrage and is just adding to the growing evidence that we are losing thousands of lives and permanent injuries to our soldiers, for what? Oil? Money? Why are we not trying to educate the Iraqis if liberating them is so important.

My daughter tells me, "Mom, while I was in Iraq, the children were never in school, they were out in the street begging for food unsupervised. I was never sure what we were, or are still, trying to accomplish in Iraq. I never saw the U.S. do anything to make things better while I was there. My unit would go out on a useless mission and end up being shot at in the dark by our supposed allies because communication between the U.S. and our allies was so poor. We need to get the hell out of Iraq and let them solve their own problems. No one benefitted from us being there. Why do we think we should be liberating all these countries when we can't even feed or house our own children in the U.S.? How about working on oppression and racism here in the U.S.? Maybe we need someone to come liberate *us*."



I could tell that my daughter felt liberated herself and finally touched on some of her anger for the Army as she went on.

Listen closely to me now. We need to bring our soldiers home *now* and take care of them when they get here. We are moving into the fourth year of a war that should never have happened. The largest air assault since the invasion of Iraq three years ago has just been launched by the U.S. The problem remains: This war was wrong from the beginning and continuing it will not make it right. A continuation – and now escalation – of the war in Iraq will only lead to more deaths among U.S. troops and Iraqi children, women and men. It will make us less safe in the world. It will mean more troops suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. We also need to take care of the troops when they get home, giving them all the support that they need. The administration has failed at this as well.

Congress is responsible for allowing Bush to take the nation to war; Congress continues to fund the war, which allows it to continue; and Congress has failed to show leadership and take action to bring the war to an end. We are calling on Congress to show some leadership, take a stand and bring our troops home now.

Although it is true that the president ordered the troops into Iraq, and Bush used and continues to use fear of terrorism and of al Qaeda to try to justify his policies and to keep the American people from asking the questions that need to be asked, Congress has been complicit with Bush's plan. They have gone along with Bush's war plan and have consistently failed to challenge and question his actions. It is past time for both Republicans and Democrats in Congress to show some courage, speak out and bring our troops home now.

There are those who would ask for a moment of silence. Tell that to the grieving mother, the young wife, the orphaned child of the 2,314 dead soldiers. They will listen to that silence *forever*. A moment of silence isn't enough! Many politicians want to offer a moment of silence at times like this, "to honor the sacrifice of our service men and women." Politicians who want to honor the fallen and support our troops need to show some leadership and speak out to bring our troops home NOW!

You here today are part of a massive groundswell of opposition. My family is asking you to reach out to friends who have not yet taken action, and encourage them to get involved now. Speak out in your own circles and show that dissent is patriotic. As we spiritually pray for peace, let's start demanding peace from our nation's leaders. Demand an end to the killing and the violence. Now is not the time for passivity. Now is the time to write the letters, make some noise. Do not be complacent anymore.

Do something every day to demand peace and the safe return of every one of our soldiers NOW!

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