

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

WHEN PRESIDENT BUSH ASKS US TO TAKE HIS word for it that sending another thirty thousand troops to Baghdad is a good idea, I'm reminded of the time I bought a beat-up old van from an affable ex-convict with a disarming manner I found hard to resist. After assuring me I didn't need to have a mechanic check out the van first because it was in top-notch condition, he looked me in the eye and said, "I told you the truth about being a bank robber. Why not trust me about this?" A few days later, when the steering wheel practically came off in my hands, it was hard to appreciate the irony of this ex-con's van refusing to go straight, preoccupied as I was just then with not getting killed.

BUSH ESCALATES THE WAR WHILE DEMOCRATS hem and haw. I don't get it: with a majority in both houses, is a "nonbinding resolution" really the best they can do? It sounds like something a timid married couple dreamt up to invigorate their humdrum sex life.

BEFORE LEAVING FOR AN ANTIWAR DEMONSTRATION in Washington, D.C., I asked a neighbor how many years she'd been demonstrating for progressive causes. "More than sixty," she replied. Then she shrugged and added, "Not that it seems to have done any good." "Well, you never know," I told her. "If you hadn't demonstrated, things might be even worse." Did I really mean that, or was I merely trying to make her feel better? Perhaps I was just trying to keep my own spirits up. As the train I'm on winds its way north through the gently rolling North Carolina countryside, I remember making this same journey, for this same reason, more than four years ago. Back then President Bush was preparing to depose a fearsome dictator, dismantle his horrific weapons, and liberate his people. Now the dictator has been deposed (at the cost of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives); the weapons have proven to be nonexistent; and of the nearly 30 million Iraqis we've "liberated," 2 million have fled the country, and an equal number have been displaced from their homes. If a comparable exodus occurred in the United States, 40 million Americans would be clogging the roads, setting up tents outside the White House, and furtively crossing the border to Mexico under cover of night.

MAYBE I'M BEING TOO HARD ON THE DEMOCRATS. Bush is notorious for being vindictive, and his single-mindedness about punishing those who cross him is well-known. Besides, didn't I get a lesson early in life about bullies? One day, fed up with a fifth-grade classmate's nonstop taunts, I challenged him to a fight — a reckless act that felt momentarily exhilarating, even though I suspected I was in for a beating. I was a smart, chubby, well-mannered kid who knew nothing about fighting. Louis was smaller than me but wiry and tough; though his grades may not have been as good as mine, he was a genius at dishing out abuse. When we met after school, he didn't waste any time; he punched me hard, right in the solar plexus, pushed me to the ground, and sat on my chest. I struggled to rise, but he had

me pinned. Smiling triumphantly, he told me to give up. "No," I said. He raised a clenched fist. "Say, 'I give up,'" he insisted. I looked into the eyes of this obnoxious little prick whom I'd wanted so badly to teach a lesson. I looked at his fist. Under the circumstances, there was only one thing to say.

WHY ARE MOST ANTIWAR DEMONSTRATIONS SO shrill, so self-righteous, so . . . warlike? On an unseasonably warm day in January, I stand on the National Mall listening to one interminable speech after another, feeling like an extra in a Biblical epic with a cast of thousands, applauding at the applause lines, trying not to look bored. There are forty speakers on the program. Forty! Some of the speeches are thoughtful, even moving; most, however, are angry rants that ignore the sad lessons of human history. I mean, when have humans not fought with one another, or with Nature, or with their own natures? But I didn't come to Washington to be inspired. I came to be counted. I came to insist that Democrats in Congress embrace the mandate they were given last November. No, I don't like demonstrations. But, to my mind, showing up for a march like this is the civic equivalent of doing the dishes or emptying the trash: the dirty, unglamorous work of living in a democracy.

SINCE LAST NOVEMBER'S MIDTERM ELECTIONS, what's changed? Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi are ensconced in larger and more elegantly appointed offices. The Democratic leadership, which regularly reminds us it supports the troops, has just agreed to allocate every penny of the \$130 billion supplemental defense budget requested by the president, with no strings attached. This is supporting the troops? By making sure they stay in Iraq? It's like supporting a suspected terrorist's freedom of speech by letting him scream while he's being tortured.

FEDERAL AND STATE INVESTIGATORS ARE STILL mulling over whether to bring charges against Mark Foley, the Republican congressman who resigned last fall after it was discovered that he'd sent sexually explicit e-mails to teenage boys who'd previously been employed as House pages. Foley's actions were roundly condemned by his colleagues. I wonder how many of them pondered the fact that young soldiers in Iraq are really getting hit upon, you might say, by an enemy considerably more dangerous than a glad-handing politician from Florida. Foley crossed the line with his lurid e-mails. But how many lines has the Bush administration crossed in flouting the Geneva Convention, chipping away at the U.S. Constitution, and turning Iraq into a charnel ground? President Bush called Foley's actions "disgusting." Fair enough. Yet every week more American soldiers die in Iraq, while others are sent home with devastating psychological scars, irreversible brain damage, and lost or mangled limbs — their minds and bodies ravaged not by Mark Foley, but by George W. Bush's endless, pitiless, ravenous war.