

Delta into the sole rationale for the Kerry presidency. Watching John Kerry “reporting for duty” at the Democratic convention, I found myself pining for an unscheduled walk-on by Dr. Gilkes, P. G. Wodehouse’s headmaster at Dulwich College in England. Gilkes, a Dumbledore-type figure of six-foot-six with a long white beard, was dedicated to keeping his boys from “getting above themselves.” Wodehouse recalled his reaction to some triumph on the cricket field as follows:

“So you made a century against Tonbridge, did you, my boy? Well, always remember that you will soon be dead, and in any case, the bowling was probably rotten.”

If only the Democrats had had some latter-day Gilkes figure to clip Kerry around the ear and tell him to stop being such a perishing puff after the first Vietnam retro road-show stop of this hollow vanity candidacy. How much pain the party would have been spared. How easily it could have avoided running Kerry-Edwards as a Bob Hope-Jill St. John ticket with all the faux sexual chemistry but none of the gags. In 1960, accepting the nomination in another perilous time, the prototype JFK—the one warming up the initials for the present colossus—never felt the need to mention PT-109, never mind base his entire candidacy on it, or reunite his crew to serve as warm-up act and campaign mascots. But 44 years on, today’s Dems loved condescending to Kerry’s “band of brothers” at that Boston convention. Never in the field of human conflict was so much made of so few by so many.

For a couple of years now, I’ve heard big-time Democrats say that “of course” they support our troops even though they oppose the war. I’ve never quite understood what that meant. But I think that’s what most Dems saw in Kerry: They supported a soldier who opposed a war because he was the embodiment of their straddle. Alas, if you detach the heroism of a war from the morality of it, what’s left but braggadocio? Anyone can latch on to that “band of brothers” line from *Henry V*, but you’d think a chap from a Swiss finishing school would be aware of the rest of the speech:

Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.
And say “These wounds I had on Crispin’s day.”
Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,
But he’ll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day . . .

And even some he didn’t do—gun-running to Cambodia, etc. As the English say, it’s not cricket. I don’t know whether, at any of the numerous elite educational establishments he attended, John Kerry ever played cricket. (For an American politician on the stump, he has a curious taste in sports: “I love baseball. I love football. I love sports. French skiers.”) But this behavior is so unseemly, I’m confident that not only is it not cricket, it’s not even French skiing.

There are two likely outcomes this November: Kerry will lose narrowly, and we’ll be in for another four years of whining about how the world’s biggest moron managed to steal a second election; or he’ll lose decisively. The second option will be better for the long-term health of the Democratic party. The third option—a regally insulated president, Chiraquiste and Chiraquesque—is too grisly to think about. **NR**

In Vietnam

BYRON YORK

LAST May, when the newly formed group Swift Boat Veterans for Truth first spoke to the press about John Kerry, the men—mostly Kerry’s fellow officers from the four months he skippered a Navy Swift boat in Vietnam—seemed divided on the issue of Kerry’s war record. Some questioned the medals he was awarded. Others had no desire to cast doubt on his service. But all agreed on one thing: that Kerry had betrayed them when, upon returning from Vietnam, he characterized the American military—and, by extension, the Swift boat veterans themselves—as having committed widespread atrocities in Southeast Asia.

That was then. After their opening news conference, the veterans—most of whom had not seen one another in 35 years—began talking among themselves about their memories of Kerry. They read Douglas Brinkley’s hagiographic war biography, *Tour of Duty*, and found descriptions of events they didn’t recognize. They compared notes. And their point of view changed. They came to question what Kerry had done, not just after leaving Vietnam, but while he was serving alongside them. In particular, they came to question some of the cornerstones of Kerry’s Vietnam record, the engagements in which he won the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, and three Purple Hearts. The result of that questioning was a book, *Unfit for Command*, written by the group’s main spokesman, John O’Neill.

Going public was, in some ways, an audacious decision. Kerry has citations for his medals that commend, among other qualities, his “gallantry and intrepidity” in battle, along with his “extraordinary daring and personal courage” (to quote the citation from his Silver Star). How could O’Neill and the Swift boat veterans challenge that?

Head on. *Unfit for Command* charges, for example, that the Silver Star was “arranged to boost the morale” of Kerry’s unit and was “based on false and incomplete information provided by Kerry himself.” The Bronze Star was “a complete fraud.” And two—perhaps even all three—of Kerry’s Purple Hearts resulted from minor, accidental, “self-inflicted” wounds that did not merit recognition.

The Swift boat vets also challenged other aspects of Kerry’s Vietnam history. They questioned his oft-repeated—and sometimes extravagantly detailed—accounts of spending Christmas 1968 in Cambodia, at a time when the U.S. government was denying there were any American forces in that country. And they focused an intense spotlight on Kerry’s anti-war activities, in particular his testimony before Congress in 1971.

Unfit for Command, and a series of television ads made from it, have scored some direct hits. But O’Neill and the Swift boat veterans have also missed their mark on occasion, giving the Kerry campaign an opening to claim that everything they say is untrue. In the end, however, when all the claims and counter-claims are balanced against one another, it seems clear that the

veterans, relying mostly on their own eyewitness experiences, have raised some valid—and serious—questions about John Kerry’s four months in Vietnam.

CHRISTMAS IN CAMBODIA

Perhaps the most direct challenge the Swift boat vets have made to Kerry’s credibility focuses on his account of spending December 24 and 25, 1968, on board his Swift boat, PCF-44, in Cambodia. It’s a story Kerry has told many times. In a March 1986 Senate speech, he said that spending the holiday in Cambodia, under fire from Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge guerrillas, was “a memory which is seared—seared—in me.”

In June 1992, Kerry said to the Associated Press, “We were told, ‘Just go up there and do your patrol.’ Everybody was over there [in Cambodia]. Nobody thought twice about it.” He told the story again in September 1997 before a subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And in a June 2003 profile in the *Washington Post*, Kerry revealed that he kept an old camouflage hat—“my good luck hat”—which he said was “given to me by a CIA guy as we went in for a special mission in Cambodia.”

But it appears there is no evidence that Kerry actually spent Christmas in Cambodia. Steven Gardner, who served on board Kerry’s boat in December 1968, as well as part of January 1969, told NATIONAL REVIEW that at the time, in the area in which Kerry and his crew were operating, it was not possible to take a

even if Kerry can show that he crossed the border once, he certainly did not do so at Christmas 1968, as his dramatic accounts claimed.

THE FIRST PURPLE HEART

Another area in which the Swift boat veterans have raised fundamental questions concerns the first of Kerry’s three Purple Hearts. On December 2, 1968, newly arrived in Vietnam, the future senator volunteered to undertake a nighttime mission on a small “skimmer” craft north of Cam Ranh. Kerry and the others in his boat saw a group of sampans being unloaded on the beach. They set off an illumination flare to get a better look. Something happened—it’s not clear what, although there’s no indication that anyone in the sampans opened fire—and Kerry began shooting. During the firing, “a stinging piece of heat socked into my arm and just seemed to burn like hell,” according to Kerry’s recollection in *Tour of Duty*.

A few hours later, upon his return, Kerry went to the medical facility at Cam Ranh Bay. “He told me that he had received small-arms fire from shore,” Louis Letson, the Navy doctor who saw Kerry that day, told NATIONAL REVIEW. But Letson says Kerry’s wound did not come from a bullet but was instead a bit of shrapnel of unknown origin.

“What I saw was a small piece of metal sticking very superficially in the skin of Kerry’s arm,” Letson recorded in a written account detailing his encounter with Kerry. “The metal frag-

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Swift boat to Cambodia. “It was physically, totally, categorically, across-the-board impossible to get into the canal that went to Cambodia with a Swift boat,” Gardner says. “There were concrete pilings that were put in the water . . . plus, the Navy kept patrol boats there to make sure nobody went in.”

Gardner, a member of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, is quite open about his opposition to Kerry. But Kerry’s supporters aren’t much help, either. James Wasser, who was also on Kerry’s boat at the time, told the *Boston Globe* that he did not think the boat went into Cambodia, although it came “very, very close.” Another pro-Kerry crewmate, Michael Medeiros, told the paper he didn’t remember going into Cambodia with Kerry, either. In fact, none of the so-called “band of brothers” came forward to say that he had been with Kerry in Cambodia.

Faced with the evidence, the campaign began to backtrack. Spokesman Michael Meehan issued a statement saying Kerry had been “on patrol in the watery borders between Vietnam and Cambodia.” Meehan also said that on one occasion Kerry “crossed into Cambodia at the request of members of a special-operations group.” But the campaign did not produce evidence of Kerry’s mission, and it seems beyond dispute that,

ment measured about 1 cm. in length and was about 2 or 3 mm in diameter.” Letson said he used forceps to remove the piece of metal, which had penetrated no more than 3 or 4 mm into the skin. “It did not require probing to find it, did not require any anesthesia to remove it, and did not require any sutures to close the wound,” Letson wrote. “The wound was covered with a bandaid.”

Letson also said that at least one of Kerry’s crewmates “confided that they did not receive any fire from shore, but that Kerry had fired a mortar round at close range to some rocks on shore. The crewman thought that the injury was caused by a fragment ricocheting from that mortar round when it struck the rocks. That seemed to fit the injury which I treated.” (Letson told NATIONAL REVIEW that he remembered Kerry’s case so well in part because “some of his crewmen related that Lt. Kerry had told them that he would be the next JFK from Massachusetts.”)

When Letson first went public with his account, the Kerry campaign suggested that he had not been present at Cam Ranh Bay and was not even a medical doctor. In a letter threatening television-station managers who ran the first Swift boat ad, Kerry’s lawyers wrote, “The ‘doctor’ who appears in the ad,

Louis Letson, was *not* a crewmate of Senator Kerry's and was not the doctor who actually signed Senator Kerry's sick-call sheet. In fact, another physician actually signed Senator Kerry's sick-call sheet."

But it turned out Kerry's lawyers were wrong. The sheet was signed not by another doctor but by Letson's assistant, J. C. Carreon, who is no longer alive. And the sick-call sheet's description of Kerry's wound, while very brief, is entirely consistent with Letson's recollections. It reads, in full: "Shrapnel in left arm above elbow. Shrapnel removed and appl bacitracin dressing. Ret to Duty."

Beyond the question of the severity of Kerry's wound, or whether it came from enemy fire, the Swift boat vets raised the issue of whether it was an appropriate occasion for the awarding of a Purple Heart. That issue is important because this Purple Heart, along with the two others Kerry won later, allowed him to leave Vietnam before his normal tour of duty was finished.

Not long after seeing Letson, Kerry went to his commanding officer, Grant Hibbard, to apply for the medal. "He had this little piece of shrapnel in his hand," Hibbard recalled in *Unfit for Command*. "It was tiny . . . I told Kerry to 'forget it.'" But some time later—Hibbard says he does not know how—Kerry was awarded the medal.

It's not clear how the approval procedures worked in this case, but the gap in time between Kerry's wound and the awarding of his Purple Heart seems to indicate that there was some sort of snag in the process. According to records released by the campaign, Kerry was formally awarded the Purple Heart on February 28, 1969—88 days after he was originally wounded. In the case of his second Purple Heart, Kerry was wounded on February 20, 1969, and was formally awarded the medal on March 5—a processing period of 13 days. For the third, Kerry was wounded on March 13, 1969, and was formally awarded the medal on April 17—a span of 35 days.

The dates come from the citations for each medal, which Kerry has posted on his campaign website. There is likely more paperwork involving the Purple Hearts in Kerry's records, and some of it might shed more light on what happened, and perhaps on why the first Purple Heart took longer to approve, but so far Kerry has not authorized public release of the records.

THE RASSMANN INCIDENT

No event plays a larger role in Kerry's Vietnam epic than the March 13, 1969, engagement in which Kerry pulled Army Green Beret Jim Rassmann from the Bay Hap River. Rassmann, who has become an active surrogate speaker for Kerry on the campaign trail, says that he was on board Kerry's boat that day, in a group of five Swift boats, when one of them, PCF-3, was rocked by a mine explosion. After that, Rassmann says, the entire group of boats came under heavy fire from both shores of the river. Then, according to Rassmann, there was another explosion, this one near Kerry's boat, which threw Rassmann overboard. Rassmann dove underwater to avoid both the gunfire and the propellers of the Swift boats; when he came up for air, he says, all the boats had left. But there was still shooting. With bullets whizzing around him, Rassmann dove again, and again. Then he saw Kerry's boat coming back to get him. "John, already wounded by the explosion that

threw me off his boat, came out onto the bow, exposing himself to the fire directed at us from the jungle, and pulled me aboard," Rassmann wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*.

When the Swift boat veterans got together to talk about the incident, they found they had very different memories. Jack Chenoweth and Larry Thurlow, who were young lieutenants in command of the two boats immediately behind

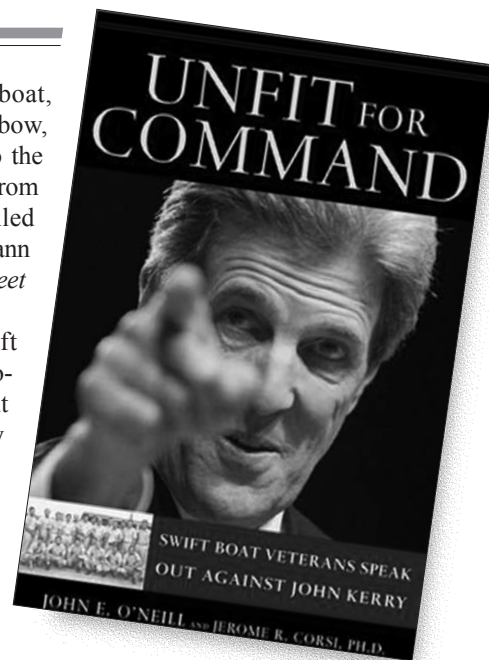
PCF-3, found that while they recalled the first mine explosion very well, they did not remember any second explosion at all. And they did not remember any gunfire coming at their boats from the banks. "There was no hostile fire," Chenoweth told *NATIONAL REVIEW*. "The only thing that happened that day was the mine."

What they did remember was that, immediately after the explosion, their boats began firing at the banks. That was standard procedure; when the mine went off about 20 yards in front of them, their first assumption was that it was the beginning of an attack from the banks. So the lieutenants ordered their men to begin firing at the banks to stop any assault before it started.

"I just started hosing down the beach area with about 300 or 400 rounds of ammunition," Van Odell, the gunner's mate on Chenoweth's boat, told *NATIONAL REVIEW*. "I was firing in bursts. I stopped, and there was no tracer fire coming in, no buzzing around my head, no bullets hitting our boat."

With no hostile fire coming in, Chenoweth, Thurlow, and Odell say they stopped shooting and concentrated their efforts on helping the wounded men aboard PCF-3. All three remember that after the explosion, Kerry's boat, PCF-94, moved away from the scene. It is not clear to them whether Rassmann ended up in the water as a result of Kerry's boat's accelerating or for some other reason. In any event, Chenoweth says he was about to pick up Rassmann—was just a few yards away from him—when Kerry returned and pulled Rassmann out of the water.

The medal citations for Kerry and for Thurlow (who, like Kerry, won a Bronze Star for his actions that day) say that everyone was working under enemy small-arms and automatic-weapons fire. But the Swift boat veterans have raised at least some doubt about that. For example, in addition to their personal recollections, they say that there were no bullet holes in the boats, indicating a lack of hostile fire. While that is not entirely accurate—records indicate that there were three bullet holes in Thurlow's boat, at least one of which he attributes to an earlier engagement—it does suggest that the boats were not significantly shot up in the incident. Compare that with another ambush, shortly before Kerry took command of PCF-94, in which the boat was riddled with about 100 bullets.



In the end, no one disputes that Kerry did in fact pick up Rassmann. And it's possible that some of the differences in the stories can be attributed to the fog of war. For example, by all accounts, there was chaos after the mine went off under PCF-3. Somehow Rassmann fell into the water. At the same time, he heard heavy gunfire. From his perspective, it might have been reasonable to believe there was a firefight going on. On the other hand, perhaps it is possible that the Swift boats did actually receive some light fire from the bank during the time they were "hosing down" the area, although no one was hit.

In any case, the Swift boat veterans' account of the Rassmann incident casts Kerry's actions in a somewhat less heroic light than, say, the legend-building presentation at the Democratic convention. But it is simply not an open-and-shut case on either side, and, barring some future revelation that could change the story entirely, it seems likely that it will remain in dispute.

THE SILVER STAR AND MORE PURPLE HEARTS

When first faced with the Swift boat veterans' accusations, the Kerry campaign lashed out in what proved to be a vain attempt to stop the controversy before it started. They claimed, for example, that none of the Swift boat group had served with John Kerry. "Not one of those people served on the boat," spokesman Meehan told NATIONAL REVIEW. "They're not fellow officers. They weren't on Kerry's boat." The Swift boat vets

Kerry's wound, while not serious enough to keep him away from duty, was more substantial than the wound for which he was awarded his first Purple Heart.

The Swift boat vets also criticize Kerry's third Purple Heart, the one awarded after the Rassmann incident. Kerry suffered two wounds that day, one a shrapnel wound to the buttocks and another an injury to his arm. Both *Tour of Duty* and the Swift boat veterans' accounts say that Kerry was hit by shrapnel when he dropped a grenade in a bin of rice, an action that was part of a general policy to deplete supplies for the Viet Cong. "I got a piece of small grenade in my ass from one of the rice-bin explosions," Kerry said in *Tour of Duty*. Later in the day, during the Rassmann incident, Kerry is said to have hurt his arm in the (disputed) explosion near his boat after the mining of PCF-3. While the rice-bin wound seems clearly accidental, there also seems no doubt that any injury Kerry suffered in the wake of the mining was the result of a hostile enemy action.

Perhaps the weakest case made by the Swift boat vets concerns the action in which Kerry won the Silver Star. That occurred on February 28, 1969, when Kerry famously beached his Swift boat, jumped onto land, and chased and killed a Viet Cong guerrilla who had fired a rocket at the boat. The Swift boat veterans suggest that Kerry's action was not only not heroic, but reckless and dangerous. They also suggest that the guerrilla was a teenager, clad only in a loincloth, who was fleeing when Kerry

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no more served with John Kerry, Meehan explained, than anybody else who might have been in the Navy hundreds of miles away. "There were a lot of people in the United States military from 1966 to 1970," he said.

That didn't work. Of course the Swift boat veterans served with Kerry. They went out on operations with him—both the actions in which Kerry received the Silver Star and the Bronze Star involved more than one Swift boat. They bunked with him (and Steven Gardner did, in fact, serve on Kerry's boat). They were there, and, regardless of what one might think about their views, they have more than sufficient standing to talk about John Kerry.

On the other hand, some of their criticism of Kerry has fallen short. They suggest, for example, that Kerry's second Purple Heart was, like the first, accidentally self-inflicted. It happened on February 20, 1969, when Kerry was on a mission in the Cua Lon River: Suddenly, the boat was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade, and Kerry suffered a shrapnel wound in his left leg. One member of the Swift boat veterans was on another boat during that mission and suggests there was no hostile fire, but there appears to be no reasonable scenario under which Kerry's wound could have been self-inflicted. And there *is* evidence that

killed him. And they suggest that there was some sort of official interference in the awarding of the medal that resulted in the Silver Star's being awarded with suspicious haste.

But officials considered the recklessness of Kerry's actions when they awarded him the medal—something that commanding officer George Elliott, now a member of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, has said on a number of occasions. On the lone-guerrilla issue, crewmates who were there at the time have recollections that conflict with the version of the story in *Unfit for Command*. "Number one, it was a man," Fred Short, who was on board Kerry's boat and now supports Kerry's candidacy, told NATIONAL REVIEW. "And if it was just one guy, he was real good, 'cause he fired about four or five rocket-propelled grenades at once." That testimony is supported by the account of William Rood, who commanded the other Swift boat in the action and believes there were other guerrillas firing at the Americans. And unlike the Rassmann incident, the Swift boat vets have not been able to produce eyewitnesses to challenge that version of events. As for the haste with which the medal was awarded, it is simply not clear what happened—perhaps more could be learned from the records that Kerry has not yet released.

Finally, the Swift boat veterans are caught in a difficult argu-

ment over the Silver Star. They say they are not condemning Kerry's killing of the young guerrilla, only the fact that he received such a prestigious decoration for it. But in *Unfit for Command*, O'Neill writes that Elliott, when he approved the medal, did not realize that Kerry "was facing a single, wounded young Viet Cong fleeing in a loincloth," which suggests that Kerry acted improperly.

But imagine reading an account today of a young U.S. Army officer, patrolling the outskirts of Baghdad, who comes under attack from an insurgent with a rocket launcher. The officer orders his men to pursue the shooter—and takes the lead in the pursuit. He finds and kills the insurgent, who is still carrying the rocket launcher. Since the insurgent had already fired on U.S. troops, and since the insurgent was still armed, how many Americans would question the officer's conduct? Probably not many (and, in one of the many ironies of this case, the people angered by the incident would likely be Kerry supporters).

THE UNSPOKEN CODE

Bill Shumadine remembers John Kerry well. From June 1968 until June 1969, Shumadine was a young Navy lieutenant in command of a Swift boat in Kerry's unit. Kerry often kept to himself, Shumadine told *NATIONAL REVIEW*, but at times, he opened up, talking about his ambitions and his political role model, John F. Kennedy.

"We'd be sitting around and he'd talk about his destiny," Shumadine says. "He was telling us, 'I've got the same initials as JFK, I went to an Ivy League college, we're both from the same region, he got his start in public by being a hero on a small craft . . .'" Kerry seemed especially interested in winning medals, Shumadine remembers. At times Shumadine and some of the other Swift boat lieutenants believed that Kerry was in Vietnam, at least in part, "to get his medals and get out of there."

Now, 35 years later, Shumadine is part of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. And what seems clear from all the questions that he and his colleagues have raised is that Kerry did more than perhaps exaggerate aspects of his Vietnam service. Rather, Kerry—an exceedingly ambitious young man with a penchant for self-promotion—violated an unspoken code by which the Swift boat sailors operated. Under that code—the code of can-do military men—you're not supposed to make movies of yourself, as Kerry did, to illustrate your heroism. (Even a fellow veteran on Kerry's side, Thomas Vallyely, once told the *Boston Globe* that "John was thinking Camelot when he shot that film, absolutely.") Under the code, you're not supposed to exaggerate your actions in after-action write-ups, as the Swift boat veterans believe Kerry did, or to leave your command early, as Kerry also did. And under the code, you are not supposed to apply for a Purple Heart for a wound that required a dab of bacitracin and a Band-Aid.

Of course, Kerry was entitled, under the military's regulations, to ask for that Purple Heart. And he didn't give himself the other medals, either; the Navy approved each one. But the way he operated, taking advantage of the full measure of the rules to compile a politically appealing résumé, diminished some of those accomplishments, at least in the eyes of many of his fellow Swift boat sailors. They didn't like it then, and they don't like it now.

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A Futile Foreign Policy

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

JOHAN KERRY is worried about his record of support for gay unions, abortion-on-demand, and other hot-button liberal causes that rile moderate swing voters outside of New England. One way to counteract the image of an out-of-touch Boston liberal is to sound hawkish on foreign policy: If Vietnam was once something to be tapped for proof of a young Kerry's opposition to the corporate military-industrial complex, it is now even more richly re-mined in his gray years for evidence of military valor, toughness, and hyper-patriotism.

The slogans "Just as tough, but smarter," and "Respected, not just feared" now summarize the Kerry-Edwards party line on foreign policy. With those flippant phrases, a Jamie Rubin, Sandy Berger, Rand Beers, Joe Biden, or Joe Wilson can promise new style, same substance. In light of an amazing military victory in Iraq, followed by a difficult occupation, Kerry's most recent statements suggest that he would not necessarily have done anything different from what President Bush did in invading Afghanistan and Iraq, but instead would have "reached out to" and "sat down with" allies; such an embrace of multilateralism, we are assured, would have avoided a "unilateral," "preemptive," and costly American enterprise. Kerry's Iraq—it is presupposed that someone else mysteriously would have first removed Saddam—would purportedly now have involved a multinational effort, aimed more cautiously at order and stability rather than at unworkably radical democratic transformation.

MAN OF INDECISION

To the degree that there is any consistency in Kerry's evolving positions about the use of force, there seem at least two constants: partisanship and expediency. Thus Republican administrations' efforts to remove Saddam in 1991, and rebuild Iraq in 2003, prompted Kerry's initial opposition and subsequent support, depending on the pulse of the battlefield—yes to war, if victory looks assured and cheap; no, if it is in doubt or its consequences turn messy. Thus Bill Clinton's five air campaigns against Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo, and Sudan—often without congressional or United Nations sanction—earned not Kerry's principled opposition to unilateralism, but his partisan approval, especially since Americans

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