

Rethinking Schools

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"What About the Iraqi Children?"

Spring 2003

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the text of a speech made at an anti-war rally in February 2003 by Charlotte Aldebron, a 12-year-old who attends Cunningham Middle School in Presque Isle, Maine.

This speech is very powerful. It's an excellent example of how someone can try to take a different perspective and use it in a persuasive way.

We recognize that students can never "truly" assume the positions of people who they are not -- in historical role plays in the classroom or in discussions of current conflicts. But this speech shows the power of getting children and young people to try view things from a different perspective.

Comments may be sent to Charlott's mother, Jillian Aldebron, at aldebron@ainop.com

Charlotte has received worldwide attention for this speech -- not all of it constructive. She has, in particular, faced resistance and criticism from officials at her school and in her hometown. [Click here to read more about the reactions to her speech.](#)

When people think about bombing Iraq, they see a picture in their heads of Saddam Hussein in a military uniform, or maybe soldiers with big black mustaches carrying guns, or the mosaic of George Bush Sr. on the lobby floor of the Al-Rashid Hotel with the word criminal. But guess what? More than half of Iraq's 24 million people are children under the age of 15. That's 12 million kids. Kids like me. Well, I'm almost 13, so some are a little older, and some a lot younger, some boys instead of girls, some with brown hair, not red. But kids who are pretty much like me just the same. So take a look at me, a good long look. Because I am what you should see in your head when you think about bombing Iraq. I am what you are going to destroy.

If I am lucky, I will be killed instantly, like the three hundred children murdered by your smart bombs in a Baghdad bomb shelter on February 16, 1991. The blast caused a fire so intense that it flash-burned outlines of those children and their mothers on the walls; you can still peel strips of blackened skin souvenirs of your victory from the stones.

But maybe I won't be lucky and I'll die slowly, like 14-year-old Ali Faisal, who right now is on the death ward of the Baghdad children's hospital. He has malignant lymphoma cancer caused by the depleted uranium in your Gulf War missiles. Or maybe I will die painfully and needlessly like 18-month-old Mustafa, whose vital organs are being devoured by sand fly parasites. I know it's hard to believe, but Mustafa could be totally cured with just \$25 worth of medicine, but there is none of this medicine because of your sanctions.

Or maybe I won't die at all but will live for years with the psychological damage that you can't see from the outside, like Salman Mohammed, who even now can't forget the terror he lived through with his little sisters when you bombed Iraq in 1991. Salman's father made the whole family sleep in the same room so that they would all survive together, or die together. He still has nightmares about the air raid sirens.

Or maybe I will be orphaned like Ali, who was three when you killed his father in the Gulf War. Ali scraped at the dirt covering his fathers grave every day for three years calling out to him, It's all right

Daddy, you can come out now, the men who put you here have gone away. Well, Ali, you're wrong. It looks like those men are coming back.

Or I maybe I will make it in one piece, like Luay Majed, who remembers that the Gulf War meant he didn't have to go to school and could stay up as late as he wanted. But today, with no education, he tries to live by selling newspapers on the street.

Imagine that these are your children or nieces or nephews or neighbors. Imagine your son screaming from the agony of a severed limb, but you can't do anything to ease the pain or comfort him. Imagine your daughter crying out from under the rubble of a collapsed building, but you can't get to her. Imagine your children wandering the streets, hungry and alone, after having watched you die before their eyes.

This is not an adventure movie or a fantasy or a video game. This is reality for children in Iraq. Recently, an international group of researchers went to Iraq to find out how children there are being affected by the possibility of war. Half the children they talked to said they saw no point in living any more. Even really young kids knew about war and worried about it. One 5-year-old, Assem, described it as guns and bombs and the air will be cold and hot and we will burn very much. Ten-year-old Aesar had a message for President Bush: he wanted him to know that a lot of Iraqi children will die. You will see it on TV and then you will regret.

Back in elementary school I was taught to solve problems with other kids not by hitting or name-calling, but by talking and using I messages. The idea of an I message was to make the other person understand how bad his or her actions made you feel, so that the person would sympathize with you and stop it. Now I am going to give you an "I message." Only it's going to be a We message. We as in all the children in Iraq who are waiting helplessly for something bad to happen. We as in the children of the world who don't make any of the decisions but have to suffer all the consequences. We as in those whose voices are too small and too far away to be heard.

We feel scared when we don't know if we'll live another day. We feel angry when people want to kill us or injure us or steal our future.

We feel sad because all we want is a mom and a dad who we know will be there the next day. And, finally, we feel confused because we don't even know what we did wrong.

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