

Fallujah Is Not a Presidential Victory Lap. “Governor Ron DeSantis touted his time in Iraq”

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In the first 2024 Republican presidential debate last week, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis touted his time in Iraq.

“I learned in the military, I was assigned with U.S. Navy SEALs in Iraq, that you focus on the mission above all else, you can't get distracted,” he declared.

Later in the debate he stated,

“I'm somebody that volunteered to serve, inspired by September 11 and I deployed to Iraq alongside U.S. Navy SEALs in places like Fallujah, Ramadi...”

Some viewers had the impression that DeSantis was a Seal, but he was actually a Harvard Law School graduate who was a Judge Advocate General Corps (JAG) alongside the Seals. DeSantis was deployed to Iraq in 2007 and 2008, during President George W. Bush's “surge” (intended to postpone the obvious failure of the war until after Bush's second term ended).

The American troops that Bush sent to Iraq were injected into a conflict where it was often nearly impossible to distinguish friend from foe—what author Robert Jay Lifton labeled “atrocious-producing situations.” Invoking his time in Fallujah, DeSantis may be confident that few Americans recall the carnage that preceded his time there.

Fallujah was hammered by two U.S. assaults in 2004. The first attack was launched in April 2004 in retaliation for the killings of four contractors for Blackwater, a company that became renowned for killing innocent Iraqis. After their corpses were dragged through the street, the Bush administration demanded vengeance.

President Bush reportedly gave the order: “I want heads to roll.” He raved at Lt. Gen.

Ricardo Sanchez during a video conference,

“If somebody tries to stop the march to democracy, we will seek them out and kill them! We must be tougher than hell!...Stay strong! Stay the course! Kill them! Be confident! Prevail! We are going to wipe them out!”

U.S. forces quickly placed the entire city under siege. The British *Guardian* reported:

“The U.S. soldiers were going around telling people to leave by dusk or they would be killed, but then when people fled with whatever they could carry, they were stopped at the U.S. military checkpoint on the edge of town and not let out, trapped, watching the sun go down.”

The city was blasted by artillery barrages, F-16 jets, and AC-130 Spectre planes which pumped 4,000 rounds a minute into selected targets. Adam Kokesh, who was present in Fallujah as a Marine Corps sergeant, later commented:

“During the siege of Fallujah, we changed rules of engagement more often than we changed our underwear. At one point, we imposed a curfew on the city, and were told to fire at anything that moved in the dark.”

The Bush administration decided to crush the city—but not until after Bush was safely reelected. In the weeks after Election Day, U.S. Army soldiers and Marines smashed the city of Fallujah, Iraq, killing an unknown number of civilians and leaving the city a burnt-out ruin. Marine Col. Gary Brandl explained the U.S. holy mission: “The enemy has got a face. He’s called Satan. He’s in Fallujah and we’re going to destroy him.”

Up to 50,000 civilians remained in Fallujah at the time of the second U.S. assault. At a November 8, 2004 press conference, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared that “Innocent civilians in that city have all the guidance they need as to how they can avoid getting into trouble.” Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Richard B. Myers said three days later that Fallujah “looks like a ghost town [because] the Iraqi government gave instructions to the citizens of Fallujah to stay indoors.”

Supposedly, Iraqi civilians would be safe even if when American troops went house to house “clearing” insurgents out. However, three years later, during the trials for killings elsewhere in Iraq, Marines continually invoked the Fallujah Rules of Engagement to justify their actions. Marine Corporal Justin Sharratt, who was indicted for murdering three civilians in Haditha (the charges were later dropped), explained in a 2007 interview with PBS:

“For the push of Fallujah, there [were no civilians]. We were told before we went in that if it moved, it dies...About a month before we went into the city of Fallujah, we sent out flyers...We let the population know that we were coming in on this date, and if you were left in the city, you were going to die.”

The interviewer asked, “Was the procedure for clearing a house in Fallujah different from other house clearing in Iraq?” Sharratt replied,

“Yes. The difference between clearing houses in Fallujah was that the entire city was deemed hostile. So every house we went into, we prepped with frags and we went in shooting.”

Thus, the Marines were preemptively justified in killing everyone inside—no questions asked. Former Congressman Duncan Hunter admitted in 2019,

“I was an artillery officer, and we fired hundreds of rounds into Fallujah, killed probably hundreds of civilians...probably killed women and children.”

The U.S. attack left much of Fallujah looking like a lunar landscape, with near-total destruction as far as the eye could see. Yet, regardless of how many rows of houses the United States flattened in the city, accusations that the United States killed noncombatants were false by definition. Because the U.S. government refused to count civilian casualties, they did not exist. And anyone who claimed to count them was slandering the United States and aiding the terrorists.

The carnage the U.S. forces inflicting on Fallujah was supposedly not massive retaliation but the well-disguised triumph of hope and freedom. Bush announced on December 1, “In Fallujah and elsewhere, our coalition and Iraqi forces are on the offensive, and we are delivering a message: Freedom, not oppression, is the future of Iraq...A long night of terror and tyranny in that region is ending, and a new day of freedom and hope and self-government is on the way.” But it is tricky for corpses to be hopeful.

During DeSantis’ first campaign to become Florida’s governor in 2018, his first words in his first televised advertisement were, “[Ron DeSantis, Iraq War veteran](#).” *The St. Augustine Record* noted in 2018, “DeSantis was responsible for helping ensure that the missions of Navy SEALs and Army Green Berets in that wide swath of the Western Euphrates River Valley were planned according to the rule of law and that captured detainees were humanely treated.”

Most of the details of DeSantis’ time in Iraq have not been disclosed. But he was deployed into an area where stunning detainee abuses by the U.S. Army had previously been reported. In September 2005, Americans learned that three 82nd Airborne Division soldiers complained about Army cooks and other off-duty troops, for amusement and sport, routinely physically beating Iraqi detainees being held near Fallujah. One sergeant explained, “We would give [detainees] blows to the head, chest, legs and stomach, and pull them down, kick dirt on them. This happened every day.” The sergeant said that there were no problems as long as no detainees “came up dead...We kept it to broken arms and legs.” Captain Ian Fishback of the 82nd Airborne repeatedly sought to get guidance from superiors on the standards for lawful and humane treatment of detainees. He, like other officers, never received clear guidelines. Fishback publicly complained, “I am certain that this confusion contributed to a wide range of abuses including death threats, beatings, broken bones, murder, exposure to elements, extreme forced physical exertion, hostage-taking, stripping, sleep deprivation and degrading treatment.”

It would be most helpful to American voters to learn more about what exactly Ron DeSantis did during his time in Iraq. Prior to his time in Iraq, he volunteered to be a legal advisor at Guantanamo Bay detention camp. In a 2018 interview for CBS Miami, he stated that one of his tasks was to clarify “the rules for [force feeding detainees](#).” He also stated, “What I learned from [Gitmo] and I took to Iraq—they are using things like [false charges of] detainee abuse offensively against us—it was a tactic, technique, and procedure.” A Vice documentary that covered DeSantis’ role at Gitmo was scheduled for [broadcast on Showtime](#) but the May 28 air date was canceled on the day after DeSantis announced his presidential campaign.

The Pentagon's records on DeSantis' years as a JAG could help voters judge his candidacy for the presidency. But Americans would be damn fools to expect transparency from the feds or from most political candidates.

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Featured image: Des Moines, Iowa, USA – August 12, 2023: Florida Republican Governor and presidential candidate Ron DeSantis greets supporters at the Iowa State Fair fair side chats in Des Moines, Iowa. (Source: TLI)

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