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**Just Thinking, 03/24/03:  
Confessions of a Teenage Protester**  
by Justin Katz

There was no live camera in Baghdad for the start of the last Gulf War — or, more truthfully, the first phase of *the* Gulf War. My father had on the news on the initial evening of bombing, and there was nothing on the screen but a map of Iraq and a still picture of the correspondent who was reporting by phone. I recall that, on my way to an intramural volleyball game at my high school, it was a peculiarly foggy night, with flashes of lightning providing sufficient resemblance for the imagination to fill in for the images that we could not see.

Before hopping in the car, I had shuffled through my dresser and found an old, cloth camouflage belt that had come with a costume or pajamas or something. Using a black marker, I drew peace signs along the length of the belt. Then, I wrapped it around my hand, where it stayed for a portion of the war. I was, appropriately, a *sophomore*. As embarrassing as this tale from my youth may be, I find it to be brimming with symbolism of the foolishness and irony of much of the fashionable peaceniking of the day. The laughable naiveté in which I indulged, in turn, points to the larger cultural shift wrought by the war, itself, and the years that followed.

Much of my “protest” had to do with posturing derived from the retro cachet of the sixties, certainly. However, as one with no real interest in drugs and no real experience with free love, the principle behind the posture is what made it appeal to me. We heard, before the war, all of those crazy projections of tens of thousands of dead Americans, and they were not yet tired propaganda.

The first humorous irony is that the military action was so overwhelmingly precise, so quick, that I was spared even the mild inconvenience of having a cloth around my hand in a swimming pool and the mild embarrassment of odd tan lines.

The fact that I had the camouflaged prop readily accessible in my drawer points to another partial irony: I was not constitutionally repulsed by violence, per se. I did not turn away from it in movies; I enjoyed faking it in the woods behind my friend's house, brandishing my realistic, battery-powered, Uzi watergun; and I engaged in it in the occasional schoolyard fight. However, it was still possible, back then, to believe in auguries of quagmires. I very much supported the American troops, even to the extent of believing in the justness of their occupation and the application thereof. I just did not want their lives to be thrown away.

But, yes, I have to admit that, back then, emulation of John Lennon played a central role in determining my behavior. In my facile way, I got to pretend I was an artist making "brave" statements in the face of an angry society. And for the most part, the approving (or at least indifferent) reactions of my peers allowed me to continue pretending — until reasoned objections were raised, by way of supplying contextual information of which I was utterly ignorant.

To be honest, I don't recall who it was that had this dramatic influence on my views. More than likely, my impression of its having been an older male is an aggregation of my father, older boys, teachers, and others whose thoughts I heard in life or on television. In essence, I was informed that Saddam Hussein was a monster with megalomaniacal ambitions. War was the right thing to do. When pressed, I think I pulled my opinion back far enough to justify my "statement" only as a tool to discourage complacency and encourage rapid resolution, diminishing casualties among our troops, civilians, and even ordinary Iraqis forced, in one way or another, to fight on Saddam's behalf. When images from "missile cams" began reaching the public — targeting so

precise that it seemed a bomb could be dropped into Saddam's pocket — the last legitimate argument that I had began to crumble.

The belt came off my hand, and by the end of the war, I was incredulous that we had stopped short of toppling the Ba'athists.

Well, Saddam Hussein is still a monster — or at least he *was* when this phase of the war began. The weapons of the United States military are even more exact. The measured attitude and humane tactics of our military leaders — right up to the Commander in Chief — are, if anything, more clear. The false curtain drawn around America and its leadership, on which fashionable protesters project their fictional view of the world, has been sufficiently shredded for the truth behind to be visible even to the impressionable.

Without the cover provided by such well-meaning incognizants as I once was, those operating the projector are in plain view. Their ulterior motives and their hatred of America are there for all to see. Of course, they always were apparent to any who cared to look, and I've come to see my failure to do so as the true embarrassment of my naiveté.

But still, many among the young are duped and many of their elders choose to keep their gaze firmly on the treasured truths of their own younger years, largely discredited though they may be. Such fashion statements, if ever admitted as such, may very well require more than blushes to accompany their recounting. Tears will be a mild cleanser of the conscience that once sided with those who draw their peace symbols in blood. We cannot even imagine the images we've yet to see.