

# The Beauchamp affair: Are U.S. troops really sadists?

The reports were gruesome, said Patricia Cohen in *The New York Times*. In July, a U.S. soldier, identified only by the pseudonym “Scott Thomas,” published a jolting account in *The New Republic* of his comrades’ “shockingly cruel” behavior in Iraq. Thomas, who had already published two earlier stories as the liberal magazine’s “Baghdad Diarist,” told of one private who enjoyed using his Bradley Fighting Vehicle to run over stray dogs, even keeping “a tally of his kills in a little green notebook.” Another private—“infamous as a joker and troublemaker,” Thomas wrote—got his jollies wearing the top part of a human skull on his head, like a crown. Thomas said he himself had taunted a woman whose face had been largely melted by an explosion. “I love chicks that have been intimate—with IEDs,” he recalled saying. “It really turns me on—melted skin, missing limbs, plastic noses.” As a fellow grunt nearly fell over laughing, he continued, the woman desperately fled.



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either willing or unwilling dupes. Actually, it’s doubtful that they went to press with a story they knew to be false. “In all likelihood, they simply found a story that validated their views” of what they described as “the morally and emotionally distorting effects of war.” Rather than give the benefit of the doubt to U.S. soldiers fighting and dying for their country, they chose to believe the worst. Beauchamp’s lurid tale “fits perfectly

into the most virulent narrative of the anti-war left,” said Charles Krauthammer in *The Washington Post*. But instead of a searing morality play, we got a classic case of media bias run amok.

Not so fast, said *The New Republic* in an editorial. First of all, five soldiers in Beauchamp’s outfit have confirmed at least some of his reporting. Second, Beauchamp says he signed his retractions under Army pressure. Anyway, we already know that a few troops have indeed done some terrible things in Iraq, said Andrew Sullivan in *The Atlantic Online*. Or have we forgotten about Abu Ghraib? Or the Marine massacre of 24 civilians in Haditha? It would be nice if the right-wing echo chamber were as quick to acknowledge the undeniable “cases of torture and abuse by U.S. soldiers” as it is to pull out all the stops to discredit some relatively mild accusations made by someone “who is actually serving his country.”

Both sides are dug in on this one, said Phillip Carter in *Slate.com*. It’s striking how hawks and doves alike have instinctively seized on Beauchamp’s dispatches to validate “their own preconceived ideas about this war.” In this game of competing ideological agendas, the truth is beside the point. So, in fact, are the troops, whose stories are relegated to “a kind of Rorschach test that reveals more about how we view the war than its reality on the ground.”

Many people found these stories unbelievable—literally, said Howard Kurtz in *The Washington Post*. Almost immediately, editors at the conservative *Weekly Standard* began questioning whether the entire narrative was a fabrication, aimed at fueling anti-war sentiment. Under pressure, the diarist revealed himself: He was Pvt. Scott Thomas Beauchamp, Company A, Second Brigade Combat Team, First Infantry Division. Beauchamp stood by his claims. But last week, the Army said it had looked into his accounts and could not verify them. Then, an anonymous military source, quoted in *The Weekly Standard*, said Beauchamp had signed an affidavit acknowledging that his reports were full of “exaggerations and falsehoods.” But the magazine says it stands by its story.

Of course it does, said Jeff Emanuel in *National Review Online*. Otherwise, the editors would have to admit that they had been