

The media had to make a decision. The narrow route into Elizabeth, West Virginia was not a Los Angeles freeway. Lush vegetation lined the road, making it difficult for the news helicopters, hovering above, to maintain an unobstructed view of the motorcade. People lined the five-mile route, waving the U.S. flag. Months earlier, many of those same people had participated in hanging flags on their homes and in tying yellow ribbons on trees around town. At least two weeks before, every hotel within twenty miles of Elizabeth had been booked solid. Once Pfc. Lynch made it to the stage, she did as any hero would have. From her wheelchair, she waved to the crowd and gave a short speech, thanking everyone who'd helped her to live to see the day she would be celebrated as a hero. Then a convertible whisked her away.

It was all very brief, and it was lunchtime anyway. The town's businesses were eager to ring up the receipts. What the broadcast media showed the rest of the nation was snippets of Pfc. Lynch's speech. Many in the print media displayed a photograph of her in uniform next to an article. The gist of the articles I read was as follows:

*A Blackhawk helicopter, after leaving Walter Reed Medical Center at about 10:30 a.m., set down on a baseball field in Elizabeth, West Virginia where a bus was waiting to take Pfc. Jessica Lynch in a motorcade to a park in the center of town.*

She did look good in uniform—young, female, and white. Why the town of Elizabeth would celebrate her return was understandable. To them, she was a hero. Local girl goes off to war, gets taken prisoner, gets wounded, now returns home—and the nation is watching. Of course, we're going to throw a party. Why the rest of the nation was so interested in the return of this particular soldier, when a tiny fraction of the tens of thousands of troops who were mobilized for the war in Iraq had returned home to only the fanfare of their families and military bases, baffled me. A few of those soldiers had also been taken prisoner of war—among them five others from Pfc. Lynch's own army maintenance company. Weeks before she returned to West Virginia we had been told by the media that their original reports—that Pfc. Lynch had fought fiercely when her company was ambushed, and that she had sustained multiple gunshot and stab wounds in the fight--were wrong. As it turned out, she was just lucky to still be alive.

Some in the media speculated that our interest stemmed from conditioning. In other words, that the media hoopla surrounding Pfc. Lynch's capture, recovery, and homecoming was just another reality TV drama. That we would have believed anything. Let the truth be damned. After gobbling up as much as I could from the Internet and watching a few news programs the day of her homecoming, I was convinced that the truth lay much deeper than that. I had heard of the *Weakest Link* and other shows, but had never watched any of them (and didn't believe I was exceptional), but I too was interested enough in Pfc. Lynch to browse the Internet for news stories. I must say that my interest was different that of pure voyeurism—not that Americans are necessarily any more voyeuristic than people in general. I was looking for a story that would

convince me that her ordeal was worthy of the press coverage accorded it. I thought I had missed something, somewhere along the line. As I gathered stories, my interest started to pique. I was not interested in her homecoming, but in her leaving--why she left West Virginia in the first place.

Before I read about Pfc. Lynch's homecoming all I knew about West Virginia is what I learned from a documentary about the Hatfields feud with the McCoys, who lived just across the line in Kentucky. I knew that West Virginia was a hilly state, that the Appalachian Mountains covered a lot of it, and that it is veined with coal deposits and rivers. As the United State's reliance on coal decreased, so did the state's economy.

I had read that Elizabeth is the seat of the poorest county in West Virginia. I wondered about the volunteerism of a young woman from one of the poorest counties in one of the poorest regions of the country. She joined the army for the education benefits. She wanted to be a schoolteacher. Lori Piestewa, a soldier in her company who had been killed had similar goals. I know of many young people who had similar goals regarding their futures, who did not put their lives on the line to reach them. Their parents paid their college tuitions. The military has been attracting its volunteer army by promising them a future. However, it seems ironic to me that having a future involve risking ones life.

Americans may be dodging the bullet. We want the volunteer army to work, because we do not want to send our sons and our daughters off to war. Send yours. After all, they've been getting welfare benefits all their lives. We are asking the poorest of the poor to defend our pocketbooks in exchange for the promise of a decent future in America. Yes, it was important for us to jump on the Pfc. Lynch is a hero bandwagon, because we need to keep the morale of our volunteer forces high, or else there might not be anymore volunteers. It could've also been that we did not want to make the same mistake that we made when our Vietnam Vets returned home. Pfc. Lynch was not to blame for the false media reports. She had stated that she could not remember a thing about the ambush of her company, nor her capture, so why should we have pulled the red carpet out from under her. That was a valid point too. Perhaps our interest in her homecoming was the result of our sentimentality. And our reason may also have had something to do with the fact that Pfc. Lynch was an attractive white woman. Lori Piestewa, a native American, whom Pfc. Lynch talked about in her homecoming speech lost her life in the same ambush. It seems to me that losing your life as the result of war is the highest sacrifice anyone can make for their country. Shoshana Williams, an African American woman, was also taken prisoner of war, and she's scarcely mentioned.

Yes, Pfc. Lynch was a hero. Every soldier who went to Iraq was one. Why do we need heroes?