

Fallen ones: Combatants and innocent bystanders

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 27, 2004](#) issue

If you walk south out of Princeton, New Jersey, on Mercer Street for a mile or so you discover how the street got its name. Hugh Mercer, native Scot, friend and physician of George Washington, was a general in the Continental Army who lost his life in the Battle of Princeton. In early July I walked down the street and out to the battlefield, now a large open field dotted with oak trees and surrounded by lush woods.

There are no rusting artillery pieces or stacks of cannon balls on the battlefield—just a huge, haunting open space. At the western perimeter is a memorial with a plaque that reads: “This is hallowed ground. Across these fields in the early light of January 3, 1777, George Washington’s Continentals defeated British Regulars for the first time in the long struggle for American Independence.”

Nearby another plaque marks the place where the 36 soldiers who died on that winter day are buried—21 British and 15 American, buried side by side.

Standing there, I thought about those 36 young men, wondering who they were and what they thought about the conflict that became very personal and lethal for them that morning. The British were implementing decisions made thousands of miles away to defend an empire; the colonials were fighting for an idea—liberty—and a new identity—American.

I could not help thinking also about the more than 860 Americans who have died in Iraq and the thousands—some estimates are as high as 15,000 or 20,000—of Iraqi casualties, combatants and civilians. And I thought about all those who have died in our 228-year history as a nation in wars that were necessary and some that seem now to have been unnecessary, or even foolish.

In the same week I visited Princeton I saw Michael Moore’s movie *Fahrenheit 911*. He does not pretend to be neutral, and I found parts of the film unfair. The sequence showing President Bush reading to a class of Florida schoolchildren on 9/11, being

informed that a second airliner had crashed into the second tower and then sitting there, absorbing what he had just heard, trying to decide what to do and say as several minutes tick away, was employed by Moore to illustrate Bush's failure of leadership. I confess I found myself empathizing with the president and resenting the camera's intrusion into that defining moment in his life.

But Moore brilliantly documents the violence of war as experienced by combatants and innocent bystanders. History will judge whether what the U.S. is doing in Iraq makes sense or is a foolish venture. What remains constant is the sacrifice of the young in every generation—and their need for our support and prayers.