

Just Call Me Mike

INTERVIEW: MIKE FARRELL

*Most people remember him as the mild-mannered and loyal Captain B.J. Hunnicutt from the television series M*A*S*H, but in real life actor Mike Farrell is a deeply committed activist and outspoken advocate for human rights and the abolition of the death penalty. His memoir "Just Call Me Mike: A Journey to Actor and Activist" was released in February by Akashic Books.*

When Common Sense Magazine caught up with him, Farrell was recuperating from an ankle injury he sustained following a 7,000-mile motorcycle trip (another one of his passions) and preparing for a cameo on the show Desperate Housewives. He was also trying hard to finance a movie about the Terri Schiavo case, a project he says has so far met with considerable resistance from the right wing.

Christopher Moraff: You were in the service during the early 1960s. Tell me about that experience.

Mike Farrell: I joined the Marines because I bought into all that stuff about John Wayne and America and if you read the book you know there was some psychological stuff about my father - that I was trying to prove myself to him even though he had already died a year earlier. And I was in the situation of being in a working class family having graduated from High School having no plans on going to college and I knew I was going to be drafted.

So for me it was a confluence of a lot of pressures and thoughts and events and probably the most motivating one was to demonstrate to myself and the ones around me that I was a man and learning how to be one. So I joined and immediately regretted it. It was a hideous dispiriting experience to be part of this machine that was really anti-human on most levels. Although I didn't see it that way I just knew that it hurt and was miserable and where they were just digging us down in every way they could and I finally came to see what the process was about, how they operate, why they do what they do and what their rationale was for it; but still it was a pretty lousy experience.

After being in San Diego and advanced infantry training at Pendleton I was sent to Okinawa with the 3rd Marines, so I got to see what an occupying force that doesn't identify itself as an occupying force, what impact it has on the local community and I was then sent to Japan for a while where I saw a little less distinct version of the same thing.

CM: So you weren't in Vietnam?

MF: No I was in the Marines between Korea and Vietnam I was very fortunate in that. When we were on the ship on the way to Okinawa, we were told that we were changing course to go into Indochina as it was then known, and if in fact those orders were to be followed we were to prop up a friendly regime in that country so it would have been one of the earliest deployments of U.S. troops in Vietnam at the time, but fortunately for me they changed the orders.

CM: What do you think of the current occupation of Iraq and what would you say to those who never served in the military but seem happy to send others to fight the war?

MF: Well that's a well put question. I opposed the war from the beginning. I formed a group called Artists United to Win without War (co-founded with Robert Greenwald) to question the Bush administration and the media's slavish repetition of all the Bush propaganda and I'm firmly an antiwar person. I'd like to make clear I don't consider myself a pacifist because as I indicated I joined the service, I would defend my country if it came to that. I have high regard for pacifists, many of whom are some of my closest friends but it's not a view that I can personally adopt... But I think the attack on Afghanistan was done incorrectly and inappropriately and I thought the invasion of Iraq was a hideous demonstration of the kind of desire for empire and the kind of bullying behavior that the United States has been known for in recent years.

So I've opposed the war from the beginning and I think what we've done - or they, unfortunately they now have become we - have besmirched the entire reputation of our nation in the eyes of many of the world's people for years to come.

Two tangential thoughts, I was with Mary Robinson who was the President of Ireland and is now the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in about 2005 and we had a conversation about the hideousness of the Iraq debacle and she said, 'You know, people of the world at this point understand the difference between the administration and the American people. They understand that the Bush administration's policies and decisions are not necessarily reflective of the people of the United States, many of whom oppose much of their behavior,' but she said if the election in 2006 validates them and these policies, then it will be a much different story. I think that was a prophetic statement and I hated to see that [Bush] was able to stampede people on the basis of fear of terrorism into further support for all of his craziness.

Secondly, we don't have a draft today. I think if we did have a draft today the war would probably be over. Because many more segments of the population would be there and therefore vulnerable and inclined to know more about the war and much more vocal in their opposition to it. Partly for that reason and partly because of my own predilection I believe we ought to have a national service requirement in this country.

I would like to see the establishment of a program by which every young American who reaches the age of 18 has the obligation to give two years of service to her or his country with some choices and I think those choices should include the Peace Corps, some kind of domestic Peace Corps a kind of teachers' corps., or something working in the poverty arena and, of course I haven't thought it all out yet but, it would include a military option.

First of all I think it would really do a lot in involving people in the operation of the country and reinstating a sense of participation that really is missing today. And I think in payment for that, other than the stipend that would be necessary for people who are serving. I think after the two year service the government should provide a fully paid four year education. I think it would be a hugely positive step for this country.

CM: You played Ken Lay in the 2003 film *The Crooked E*, I was wondering how you went about preparing for that role and as an extension of that, what did you learn in the process about how the Enron debacle symbolizes what's wrong with America's corporate leadership?

MF: It was a combination of things. Robert Greenwald came to me with this idea and he said I'm going to do this movie would you like to do this and I was like, are you kidding, I'd love to. So he sent me a bunch of video tapes of various appearances of Lay and research material. The film just gave me a much more in depth sense of what we all kind of knew about the Enron debacle and corporate malfeasance in general. It was fun to do as an actor. It was fun to participate in something that was going to bring to the public a way to see and understand this awful behavior beyond their willingness to go beyond the headlines.

I thought it was a terrific service of Robert to do the movie and I was glad to be part of it. As far as what it did for me it really sort of underscored my frustration and rage at the way in which people in big business take advantage of the rest of America and the policies they are able to drive through the legislative process. I think we learned some things down the years but we forget them as quickly as we learn them because we're sort of cushioned by all this crap that comes over television, by clever phrases and uses of Madison Avenue techniques that have taught them how to make their message so warm and fuzzy that it tells us all the things we need to know and do and have in order to have a good life. Most of which have nothing to do with the real needs in our lives. I found it a wonderful way to expose one chink in the armor and hope that people are able to extrapolate from that a sense that this is much more widespread than they thought.

CM: Let's turn to *M*A*S*H** -- You played B.J. Hunnicutt on the show and although it ran during the Vietnam years it was set in Korea, but it was really about war in general. How conscious of making an anti-war statement were you and the rest of the cast and do you think a show like that could work today in light of the Iraq conflict?

MF: All of us knew exactly what we were doing, all of those that I can speak for, where there was really a clear intention to make an anti-war statement and at the time specifically a Vietnam War statement. But it was clear from the time Robert Altman did the movie that this was one of the key elements in tying entertainment to reality in a way that gave people some - not only information but some emotional support for their views. And I knew going into it that television wasn't going to be as hard-hitting at least in those days as was the feature but then on an ongoing long-term basis we could be very profoundly impacting and I think we were.

In fact, I think *M*A*S*H** the television series became a social phenomenon for that reason so, yeah we were very much aware - many times I said, 'I can't believe I'm getting paid to say these words.' This is astonishingly important to think that these views and these issues are going to be played out in the lives and homes of people not only all over the United States but all over the world. It's something I continue to be very proud of and I'm grateful for those people that were responsible for my being there and wonderfully grateful for my experience working with them all.

CM: Was there every any resistance from advertisers or political pressure...any need for self-censorship during that time?

MF: Well the nature of the television beast is that they have the need for censorship. They imposed censorship on us periodically but it was mostly the silly kind of socially dicey concerns about sex and issues like that - there was no-one that I'm aware of - decision or attempts to cut back on our anti-war statements. And that simply underscored for me the fact that if you are a success, if you are bringing them the numbers and the audience to their commercials then they don't give a damn what you say. As long as you serve their purposes then they're happy. Now, that was then. Today we have these extraordinary pressure groups, particularly the well organized right-wing and sometimes Christian groups that screamed and hollered when CBS wanted to release its movie, which was really a very vanilla movie, about Ronald Reagan. But they screamed and hollered and put pressure on out of fear that it was going to be critical of Reagan, their Demigod. So today I think the networks are much more cautious about anything that has political content or even perceived political content and therefore to go back to your question, **M*A*S*H*** today wouldn't work. If they had the courage to do it there's no question it would work because the audience is hungry for these things, but they don't have the courage to do it. As a matter of fact, I think they have a self-imposed mandate to avoid doing things like that.

CM: Are you still close with any of the cast members? Do they support your activism?

MF: Yes I'm still close to them; most of them are supportive of the things I do, a few of them are as involved as I am. They have their own things, you know, from Loretta Swit's involvement in animal rights to Alan [Alda's] continued involvement in the areas of trying to broaden people's perspective about science and understanding. Alan was very deeply involved in the anti-war movement during the Vietnam period and subsequent to that he was very active in women's rights, particularly the push to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. And beyond that I think he does a lot in terms of charitable work but he's not as active now on the political front. And some of the others do things in their own way.

CM: As an activist and actor you've traveled around the world and you've seen a lot of things that many of us don't get a chance to see. Is there anything that sticks out in your mind that was particularly poignant or something that you took a lesson from?

MF: They all kind of roll themselves together as a kind of reaffirmation of my fundamental beliefs - I can pick out an instance of walking through a straw floored bamboo or wood hut that was serving as a clinic in Cambodia or one in Somalia or one in different part of the world where I've been, and people look up to me, people in a very grievous situation, and they look up to me and because they see a white face they reach out to me and say 'doctor.'

It speaks to me of our responsibility; it also speaks to me of the way we are perceived in one sense. Having people spit and express their outrage and fury at America is a very different thing. All of them connect in a way for me to expressing a lesson about what it is we represent, what it is we can do and what our responsibility is.

I remember being in Cambodia at the end of the Pol Pot period when they were still fighting in the country and we were dealing with this situation on the border. And seeing and hearing from people that U.S. foreign policy was significantly involved in their issues that resulted in this terrible slaughter. And then going to Central America and seeing the same thing, but seeing we were directly involved rather than indirectly with not only funding and training and arming the Contras in Nicaragua but also the Army of El Salvador that was slaughtering it's own people.

That sort of thing makes you wake up in a kind of way that although I have some understanding of the political dynamics, seeing it happen, seeing the terror on the faces of people that have been driven from their villages and seeing the trauma that is visited on children as a result of American-provided helicopters flying over and strafing their villages...It's infuriating, it's deeply enraging to see this kind of stuff and to know that your tax dollars and your countrymen and women are responsible for it. It's more than you should have to hear about, and it's more than you should know about, but goddammit it's more than anyone should have to experience.

CM: With less than 18 months left to seal his legacy, President Bush is attempting to push forward new regulations inspired by recent antiterrorism legislation that would fast-track executions by allowing states to turn to the Justice Department instead of the courts to decide certain case issues. Can you comment on this move and on the broader issue of capital punishment in America? Why do so many Americans support it? We're supposed to be this enlightened democracy and yet we're up there with Iran and China on this issue.

MF: First of all, it's been a process if you look at the history of the curve of the support for this in the late 1960s to early 1970s. Most of the people in the U.S. were opposed to the death penalty. Richard Nixon's election resulted in a kind of manipulation of the people with fear - by the tools of fear - and it's something that could have happened before that time - I'm not sure about political tricks prior to the sixties - but the manipulation of people's fears is something that's had a tremendously negative impact on this country. Nixon used it first against communism, then against crime, and Reagan continued it in failed terms against the poor, and certainly the Bush administration has picked it up and run with it against terrorism.

What they do is sow fear in the hearts of people and they do it in a way that makes people want to hide and run and forget about their responsibilities to others and constrain themselves into thinking only of themselves and the projections of their own concerns ... so the rhetoric about the 'blood-thirsty Willie Horton's of the world that are out to get you' has generated a tremendous amount of support for people who say, well, if people are going to do these terrible things they deserve to be killed. That resulted in a spike in support for the death penalty through the seventies and eighties that has now begun to turn; over the past ten years support for the death penalty has dropped significantly. And it's done so because of the work of people in organizations like the one I'm associated with that are getting people to better understand the reality of the issue as opposed to the kind of abstract notion of somebody kills you kill them, that that's some sort of equation of justice.

And through the educational process people are beginning to understand that the system is racist at it's core, that it's only used against the poor, that it's rife with misconduct, mal-prosecution, incompetence on the part of defense attorneys that are appointed and it is simply unfair and beyond that it is entrapping innocent people. The death penalty is absolutely a political tool it has nothing to do with justice. The more people understand that, the more they are turned off by it.

CM: In the preface to your new book, you mention that being an American is often a great privilege, and I'd ask you, what kind of responsibility comes with that privilege and , in your opinion, are we living up to it today?

MF: Well clearly we're not. I think the responsibilities are huge. I think the notion that we once represented the beacon of hope for the rest of the world has been tarnished to a degree that we're now the Merchant of Death as far as the rest of the world is concerned. That, I think, is a hideous declaration of the worst aspects of our society. I think that people in this country are fundamentally fair but they are too easily led by their fears.

So I think we have a great responsibility to recognize how small we are in terms of the rest of the world's population, how grossly over consumptive we are and simply say, 'Aren't there better, more productive things we can do with ourselves and our lives, with our economy and our resources that will make us better world citizens?' I think there clearly are. My friend, the poet John O'Donohue said it best when he said, "The duty of privilege is absolute integrity." I think that's right on the money.

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