

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

► STEVE FAINARU, MISSOURI '81

Steve Fainaru, *Missouri '81*, a reporter for the Washington Post, received the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in April 2008 for his series of stories on private security contractors in Iraq that operate outside most of the laws governing American forces. The stories can be found online at www.washpost.com.

Fainaru spent some time with *The Carnation* talking about the award and his reporting career in early May 2008.

***The Carnation:* What made you decide to get into journalism?**

Fainaru: I have asked myself this question a lot. It comes up, especially now, and I must have been 14 or 15 years old when I made the decision, but I don't know why. Newspapers were always around me. Everyone in my family was an avid newspaper reader, and when I was young, I have vivid memories of my Dad reading the Los Angeles Times sports section, particularly Jim Murray. Once I moved up to San Francisco, I just remember it always being around.

I also have some family lineage. My grandfather on my Dad's side was a journalist. He was a Romanian-American journalist, and edited a Romanian-American newspaper out of Detroit. I never knew him, but perhaps it was generational osmosis! My grandfather on my Mom's side was a songwriter, so we have writing in my family. I also have a younger brother, Mark Fainaru-Wada, and he is also a journalist who along with his partner, Lance Williams with the San Francisco Chronicle, broke the BALCO steroids scandal and wrote the book *Game of Shadows*.

In addition, I played baseball in high school, and there was a guy from the Chronicle who used to cover our games, and I was always fascinated with what he did. I just thought it would be the coolest thing that you could write a story, and it would appear in the newspaper with your name. It is to this day, the best decision I have made in my life. It has given me years and years of happiness and fulfillment, and I just feel very fortunate that somehow I knew when I was a teenager that this is what I really wanted to do.

***The Carnation:* Tell us a little more about your Pulitzer Prize winning entry.**

Fainaru: They submitted ten stories that were representative of the work we had been doing all last year on private security contractors in Iraq. I had started covering Iraq in 2004, and I covered the military mostly. While I was there, these private security contractors were everywhere. I didn't really know what they did, but I'd see them everywhere. They were

always dressed informally, but were always carrying guns. There was always this curiosity about what these people did and who they were.

At the end of 2006, I went back to Iraq and started trying to do stories on the private security industry. We started out just trying to look at one company and its culture, and try to understand how many there were, who they worked for, what the contracts were like, how much risk was involved, how much combat they were seeing, and then it expanded to be something more investigative. We kept hearing about undocumented shootings of civilians that these security contractors had been involved in, huge amounts of money being spent to support these guys, and the lack of regulation that surrounded the industry.

There weren't enough troops in Iraq, so these things just started organically. There weren't enough troops, so they didn't have enough people to do the jobs, like convoy protection, protecting military installations, or guarding diplomats, so they needed to hire these security guys to do it. Since the industry grew up on the fly, there were literally hundreds of companies and tens of thousands of armed men running around with zero regulation coming out of the military and the US Government about how they should be monitored, prosecuted if they committed a crime, and all kinds of other things. None of that existed.

So we did all kinds of stories that got into those issues, and those were the stories that ultimately were submitted for the Pulitzer and that ultimately won.

***The Carnation:* Can you give us a perspective of what it was like for you reporting from the war zone in Iraq?**

Fainaru: There has been a lot of criticism about the media from both sides. People have said that the media had portrayed the war too negatively, and other people have felt like it has been glossed over.

The one thing I would say about it is that I always felt as bad as it seemed over here, it was always like a hundred

times worse when you were there. The pervasive violence and the militarization of a culture, it's really an awesome and humbling thing to behold. To me, there is no real semblance of a country left in Iraq. It's a war culture where everyone's world is basically dictated and controlled and lived in response to the reality of the violence around them. The profound ways in which that affects your life can't be overstated.

People would say to me "it's just isolated bombings" and my response would be that Baghdad is a city of 7 million people. There were times when I was there that there would be four, five or even six bombings in a day. Imagine four, five or six bombings per day in downtown Chicago, and what that would do to a society. It affects the way you take your kids to school, the way you socialize, the way you shop, and every single aspect of your life. Not to mention that there are now very few people in Iraq that don't know someone close to them who has been killed.

I think what's it's like being there is living with this oppression of violence. It's a culture that went from the oppression of Saddam Hussein to the pervasive oppression of violence. The irony is that a lot of Iraqis would prefer to go back to Saddam just because it was somewhat peaceful in its own weird way. There's not anything even remotely glamorous about it, like it is sometimes glamorized or glorified in the movies and in literature.

The Carnation: What's it like to know that now and forever you will be called "Pulitzer Prize Winning Writer Steve Fainaru?"

Fainaru: It's surreal basically. It doesn't seem quite real, even now after it has happened.

The Carnation: How did you find out that you won?

Fainaru: It was actually kinds of sad how I found out. One of the stories we did included me following around a private security company, and in particular four Americans who were working for this company. And shortly after I left, all four of them were kidnapped on the main road in Southern Iraq, and I ended up writing two long stories. One was about the company that they worked for, and one was about them. They had been missing for almost a year and a half, and finally their bodies were recovered in Basra. Nobody had known what had happened to them, but finally it was suspected that they weren't alive. The US authorities were able to recover their bodies.

So, I had gone to a funeral for one of these contractors in Lees Summit, Missouri outside Kansas City, and the funeral was over, but I had gone back to the reception at one of his relatives' houses. There were a lot of people there, and all of a sudden my phone started ringing. I thought I had turned it off, but I saw it was the office and walked outside to get it, and that's when they told me. So, it was this really somber setting, but at the same time, I had just been told something



Photo Credit: Eileen Barroso/Columbia University

Steve Fainaru, Missouri '81, (right) stands with Richard Oppel, Pulitzer Board co-chair, as Fainaru was presented with his 2008 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting

that was completely inconceivable to me. I was kind of numbed by the news, and it was so mind blowing that it was hard to compute at the time.

It really started to hit home when the Washington Post had a big celebration after they had won a record six Pulitzers this year. I went back with my son, Will, and brother for the official announcement, which was two days after I was told, which was really quite amazing. To be surrounded by your friends and colleagues and to be honored for an award that doesn't seem like it would have ever happened to you, it was amazing.

The Carnation: Talk about what the best part about it has been.

Fainaru: Since it's happened, by far the best thing about it has been that I have heard from hundreds of friends, including lots and lots of Delta Sigs that I hadn't really been in touch with in years, the old high school math teachers. It has been so amazing to be able to share with these people who you have these connections with throughout your life. The fact that my mother is so incredibly thrilled is great as well! (laughs)

The Carnation: Tell us about the book you're working on.

Fainaru: It's about private security contractors in Iraq. It's about the four Americans who went to work for the private security company, and were kidnapped and ultimately killed. It's in a context of the explosion of the private security industry in Iraq, how that happened, and what it meant to the war. It's a look at mercenary life in Iraq.

Steve Fainaru is an international reporter for the Washington Post, and resides in El Cerritos, CA. To read the full interview, check out www.deltasig.org/pulitzer.