

# John Batiste

(Retired General, President, Klein Steel, 55)

# A Picture 1,000 Words

**My family and I have now lived in Rochester for about a year and five months.** Rochester is truly a great city. It offers so much and has incredible potential. From biking on the canal path, to cross country and downhill skiing, to the theater, to wonderful music, to great schools, it has it all. There's so much to do here and it is a great place to raise a family. We live in Pittsford. Michelle and I have five children. One is still at home, the others are all off and doing their thing. We have an 8th grader at 12 Corners Middle School.

**I spent many, many years away from home during the first Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Operation Iraqi Freedom.** How do you make up that lost time with your kids? You don't. You have to really work at it. I am blessed with a wonderful family. My wife and I have been married for over 30 years. She's been through all of this with me and it has been a team effort. We are truly blessed.

**I grew up all over the world.** My father was career Army. I've probably moved 40 times. It has been a great life. As a youngster my favorites were Tehran, Iran; Athens, Greece; Monterey, California, places like that. Michelle's father was also a career Army officer and she had similar experiences.

**I left the Army after 31 years in order to speak out against our current strategy in Iraq.** I could have gone to work for any number of defense contractors as a lobbyist, but I didn't want to do that. As it turned out, there is an organization in New York city called, *Leader to Leader*, started by Peter Drucker. One of the important things they do is link retired generals with private companies like Klein Steel. The idea is that retired generals have skills that translate into private, non-defense business. It's wonderful. To make a long story short, Joe Klein linked up with *Leader to Leader*. He had been looking for a company president for some time and the planets lined up. I was attracted to Klein Steel because the company focuses on people, standards, and getting things done the right way. This really resonated with me and of course the Rochester area was attractive. Klein Steel is in the throws of expanding. Within the next four months, we will need an additional 30 employees so we are pulling out the stops to find the right people. The good news is that manufacturing in Upstate New York is on the move and we will contribute to this important momentum.

**I spent a year in Bosnia-Herzegovina beginning in December '95.** The mission was all about implementing the Dayton Accords and bridging the gaps between the Serbs, Croats, and Bosniacs, (Bosnian Muslims). The challenge in places like the Balkans and Iraq is the forces of irredentism, that is, what happens when one draws boundaries without respect to ethnic make-up. We see the same thing in Kosovo where the ethnic Kosovars are a long way from reconciling with the Serbs. The Serbs aren't about to allow the Kosovars to have their own separate country. The area of Kosovo is historically significant to the Serbs as it is the site of the Battle of Kosovo Pole where the Ottoman Empire soundly defeated the Serbs in 1389. You can imagine the national fervor that is generated by the Serbs that is equal to the Kosovar's desire for independence. It will not happen without a fight and this passion runs so incredibly deep. The same thing is true in Iraq where the British Empire drew the boundaries in the last century around what's the present day Iraq. That effort completely ignored the realities on the ground, the ethnic differences, the religious differences, the tribal differences and complexity that define Iraq. The actual boundary was drawn by Gertrude Bell in the 1920's. She has written some great books that anyone contemplating an intervention into Iraq should have read. It would have been very helpful. Irredentism really defines the challenge we face today in the Balkans, in Iraq and many other places in the world. The colonial powers in the last two centuries set the stage for major conflict today.

**There's been much human tragedy in Darfur with several hundred thousand dead and more than two million refugees.** It's astounding and we've done nothing. The UN really is impotent. It was impotent in the Balkans in Bosnia. I saw first hand the results of their work in Srebrenica in December '95. NATO could also be more focused and involved to stop some of this. I believe that the Bush administration's effort to draw down our forces from Europe will turn into a big mistake. At the end of the day, our troops in Europe are an ocean closer to the problems and without the right numbers of troops in Europe, we lose the seat at the table required to lead in NATO.

**Military theorist Carl von Clausewitz said that "war is the extension of politics by other means."** His message was that you do not commit a nation to war until you have exhausted every other diplomatic, political, and economic option. We rushed to war in Iraq without exhausting every other means. We did not set ourselves up for success.

**Every American ought to see the film, "No End in Sight."** I found it be very factual and accurate from my experience. We rushed to war. This is what happens when an administration creates a team of like minded people. President Bush and his inner circle all had the same perspective, the same thinking. Most of the administration came into office with an agenda to remove Saddam Hussein, to finish the job that the first President Bush started, at all costs. Its dangerous when you pull together a management team that all thinks alike. I harken back to the way President Lincoln selected his cabinet from those who opposed him in the national election. He was an incredibly wise man, surrounded by a cabinet with different opinions and views. One needs debate before making a decision. When President Bush throws an idea on the table, everybody says, *Three bags full, what a great idea.*

**There were a number of people that could have stopped the war in Iraq, both civilian and military.** Senior generals and admirals could have said, *No, this violates basic principals of war, violates our doctrine. We haven't exhausted all other means before committing our sons and daughters into battle.* It was a very difficult decision for me to leave the Army, to speak out. I left an institution that had been my entire life. I turned my back on promotion and another ten years of service, but I realized that if I stayed I'd be part of the problem. I had to get out and speak up for my soldiers and their families. I could do more for them out of uniform.

**War is ghastly.** It's ugly. People are maimed. People die. I think the biggest lesson that we as a nation need to take out of this is that you never commit a nation to war unless you have exhausted all other diplomatic, political and economic means to solve a problem and if you do commit then you do it with a comprehensive strategy to win and you mobilize the nation behind that effort. You pull out the stops. We have not done that. We're depending on less than one percent of the population to carry the load. Our troops are at the breaking point.

**As a life-long Republican,** I do not see a candidate I would vote for in the coming election. Where is the competence, passion for service, and integrity we need? Where are the people with good judgment and moral courage? This current bunch of candidates do not fit the mold we need. None of them are capable of solving the problems we are facing. We are at a turning point in our country. Thankfully, America is incredibly resilient and capable of making the impossible happen.



(left) Matt Sanchez, John Batiste, Andre Chatman

Interview and photograph by Michelle Cardulla