Reconstructing the War in Iraq: Post-9/11 American War Fiction in Dialogue with Official-Media Discourse

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RECONSTRUCTING THE WAR IN IRAQ:
POST-9/11 AMERICAN WAR FICTION
IN DIALOGUE WITH OFFICIAL-MEDIA DISCOURSE

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Ashley Kunsa

May 2017
RECONSTRUCTING THE WAR IN IRAQ:
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ABSTRACT

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By
Ashley Kunsa
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Dissertation supervised by Dr. Magali Michael

This project examines American-authored Iraq War fiction within the context of public discourse. Given that modern, industrialized warfare is as much created by and through official-media discourse as represented by it, fictional accounts of Iraq exist not outside or separate from this discourse but rather in a dynamic, continually evolving relationship with it. The three texts explored in this study—Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Half Time Walk* (2012), David Abrams’ *Fobbit* (2012), and Phil Klay’s *Redeployment* (2014)—thus do more than merely *represent* the war experience: operating always in conversation with how the war has been constructed, the novels and stories challenge *what* has and has not been made visible by those in power and *how* it has been rendered visible or invisible. At the same time, the texts perform a crucial intervention into the communication context, inhibiting the “discursive closure” threatened by the
unchecked perpetuation of prominent Iraq War narratives. At times directly and at others obliquely, the fictional narratives engage, interrogate, and critique official-media constructions of the Iraq War, thus challenging what has been accepted by the majority of American society as the reality of the conflict. By revising, repurposing, and undermining the vocabulary, structure, tropes, and techniques of dominant Iraq War discourse, the novels and stories I address in the following chapters alter the discursive landscape as they interact with it. Ultimately, these texts not only lay bare the construction of war-as-narrative but also make plain the lie that is the tidy, official version of the Iraq War, and their adaptations, both direct and indirect, of Vietnam War discourse suggest the contingent nature of all war narratives and the potential of fiction to serve as a positive intervening force in the cultural and political realities of the contemporary moment.

DEDICATION

For Brad and Toby—always.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

This project examines the spate of American-authored fictional texts engaging with the 2003 war in Iraq that has been published to considerable attention from book reviewers, bloggers, and readers following the official withdrawal of the United States military from Iraq on December 13, 2011.1 This influx of novels and short stories comes after a relative dearth during the previous eight years of serious fiction addressing the war, its combatants, and its impact on the home front.2 Authored by veterans and non-veterans, men and women, established and first-time writers, these post-war works approach the conflict in Iraq from a variety of angles. Some examine, from the point of view of the deployed soldier,3 the theater of war: the asymmetrical nature of the fighting, missions without clear purpose or result, the debilitating fear and dread that often characterize life on the ground. Others chart the soldier’s experience upon his or her return: the difficulty of readjusting to civilian life, the disconnection between the veteran and his/her family members and friends, the sharp contrasts between living in the U.S. and in Iraq. Still other texts offer variations on or amalgamations of these approaches, while a smaller number addresses the war experience from non-military perspectives such as those of war protestors, Iraqis, or individuals most closely involved with military personnel, including military wives and girlfriends and veterans’ siblings.

The American departure from Iraq, after nearly a decade of fighting and occupation, appears to have initiated a type of exploration of the war experience that was not altogether possible while the conflict raged on. “It is not a coincidence that the first wave of fiction is occurring after the war ended,” said former Army captain Matt Gallagher in 2013. “We need a little bit of distance. We are trying to make sense of it and that could not happen until the war was over.”4 Gallagher’s acclaimed war memoir Kaboom: Embracing the Suck in a Savage Little
War, which includes material first published on his military blog in 2007–08 while he served in Iraq, was published in 2010. But it was not until after the war, in 2013, that he published “And Bugs Don’t Bleed” in *Fire and Forget: Stories from the Long War*, a collection of short fiction he co-edited with fellow Iraq veteran and novelist Roy Scranton.

While ostensibly referring to writers, Gallagher’s “we” could also apply easily to the public for whom the fictional texts focused on the war are intended. An influx of works about a specific topic, after all, presumes an audience interested in reading about that topic, especially given today’s notoriously stringent fiction publishing industry. Still, these post-war works are not the first Iraq War fictions to be published by American authors. Denis Johnson’s epic *Tree of Smoke* appeared in 2007 to much critical acclaim. Spanning the years 1963–70, *Tree of Smoke* chronicles the U.S.’s entanglement in the Vietnam War, but, according to Roger Luckhurst, there is a “genealogical project at the heart of the novel, in which Johnson explores the origins of the Iraq War.” Both Nicholas Kulish’s *Last One In* and Benjamin Percy’s *Refresh, Refresh* also appeared in 2007, and Helen Benedict’s *Sand Queen* followed in mid-2011. Percy’s story collection was well-reviewed, while Benedict’s novel received attention for its focus on two women affected by the war, one an American soldier, the other an Iraqi civilian; neither, however, sparked the sort of interest among readers, or recognition by critics, garnered by the more recent crop of war fiction.

Indeed, in the war’s wake, it seems the time is right for the American public to begin “making sense” of the conflict—to borrow Gallagher’s phrase—via an artistic medium that differs in significant ways from those that permeated U.S. culture during the nation’s extended tenure in Iraq. Among the predominant forms of early narrative representation of the war were memoir, feature film, and documentary. Personal accounts penned by Iraq War veterans and
embedded reporters began to appear regularly as early as 2005, and films and documentaries have been released in considerable number since 2007. Between 2004 and 2009, in fact, Hollywood produced twenty-three feature films about the war. While movies such as Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker* (2008), documentaries such as Errol Morris’s *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), and memoirs such as Nathaniel Fick’s *One Bullet Away* (2005) attained wide praise and award nominations during the course of the war’s fighting, the first fictional accounts to achieve similar standing were not published until 2012, after the war’s conclusion.

The considerable production of works in these genres, as well as their early genesis in comparison with fiction, has spurred the majority of critical efforts into artistic representations of the war to focus primarily on nonfiction and film. Indeed, the sole scholarly monograph offering sustained attention to the narratives of the Iraq War, Stacey Peebles’s *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the Soldier’s Experience in Iraq* (2011), investigates soldiers’ various negotiations with identity (gender, racial, and so on) in documentary, memoir, and feature film, along with poetry. Peebles examines representations of both the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War and, as such, her claim that “contemporary American war…enforces categorization even as it forces encounters across the boundaries of media, gender, nation, and the body” is not specific to twenty-first-century war. But Peebles’s focus on categorization and the soldier’s experience has carried over to the small body of critical work considering Iraq War fiction. Papers presented at the American Literature Association’s October 2013 Symposium on War and American Literature, for instance, engaged the war’s novels and stories through a variety of lenses including disability studies and identity. In addition, a 2013 review essay in the *Los Angeles Review of Books (LARB)*, on the other hand, examines five contemporary “soldier’s novels” in the tradition of *The Iliad*, while another *LARB* piece from later in the year views each of the
recent “soldier tales,” both novels and short stories, as “independently confirm[ing] our national sense of the Iraq War as a great folly.”

Surveying the war’s aesthetic production across an array of genres in a 2012 essay, Luckhurst makes a prescient comment regarding the “muted or diffuse” fictional output in existence at the time: “wars need a definitive end, however ignominious, before there can be any sustained cultural reflection,” he says, reading the modest production of fiction within the context of a “lesson” learned from the nation’s experience in Vietnam. Like Gallagher, Luckhurst indirectly ascribes to fiction a distinct function among artistic forms of cultural expression. Indeed, fiction offers a different approach to the Iraq War, and to war generally, than other forms of narrative art. Because it is not beholden to claims of “factual authenticity” and “historical accuracy” purported to be the basis of the memoir and documentary genres, fiction maintains a unique freedom of imagination and expression. Yet not all fictional representations are purely fabricated. Elaborating a distinction between representation of a historical referent (here, the 2003 war in Iraq) as “fabrication” and as “construct,” John Frow explains that all “empirical facts are textually, discursively, ideologically built”; that any narrative of the war in Iraq is necessarily constructed does not undermine its potential for faithful representation (emphasis in the original). Moreover, while feature films are “fictional” (despite the difficulty of categorizing those labeled “based on a true story”), the visual nature of film allies it with the television news media that has become a ubiquitous presence in America’s contemporary 24-hour news society and (as this project will assert) has helped to create the dominant conceptions of the Iraq War to which the fiction responds. The examination of fiction, then, presents a unique opportunity for considering the Iraq War experience and how representations of this
experience might prompt readers to think about and beyond understandings to which they have become accustomed and, ultimately, inured.

The present study takes up the examination of American-authored Iraq War fiction within the context of public discourse. While critical discussion of the war’s fiction remains in its infancy, conversation surrounding official and media representations of the conflict quickly gained traction in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Scholars in political science, history, and particularly media studies have paid considerable attention to the interaction of the George W. Bush administration and mainstream U.S. news institutions in creating and maintaining public consent regarding Iraq, generally agreeing on the media’s key role in the government’s drive toward war.\textsuperscript{18} Adding to these efforts is the work of cultural critics, theorists, and philosophers who identify within the U.S. polity an increasing tendency toward militarism, nationalism, and a disturbing authoritarianism that threatens the democratic foundations of American society. By addressing a selection of Iraq War novels and stories within the context of these discussions, my analysis situates the emerging fiction in an ongoing conversation about cultural representations of war and the relationships among modes of public discourse. Because the Vietnam War’s legacy inflects, to some extent, nearly all conversation about the war in Iraq, I also explore the influence of the American experience of Vietnam on official-media discourse and, by extension, how the fiction responds to narratives constructed in the “shadow” of Vietnam. The Vietnam War, in other words, functions as a broader historical context in which to think about the contemporary situation.

The texts addressed in the following chapters include two novels and one collection of stories: Ben Fountain’s \textit{Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk} (2012), David Abram’s \textit{Fobbit} (2012), and Phil Klay’s \textit{Redeployment} (2014). All of these works were published after the last U.S.
troops left Iraq in December 2011, and all directly address the Iraq War experience from the perspective of one or more American soldiers or veterans. Though Fountain is a civilian, both Abrams and Klay possess military backgrounds, each having worked in public affairs during the war in Iraq. Billy Lynn takes place at Texas Stadium in Dallas early in the war and follows its eponymous military protagonist on the last day of a government-initiated promotional tour. Set in Iraq in 2005, Fobbit looks at the handling of information by U.S. military public affairs officers. The twelve stories of Redeployment, which occur variously in Iraq and the U.S., focus on the experiences of American soldiers and veterans while at war and after.

Given that modern, industrialized warfare is as much created by and through official-media discourse as represented by it, fictional accounts of Iraq exist not outside or separate from this discourse but rather in a dynamic, continually evolving relationship with it. The fiction that this study explores thus does more than merely represent the war experience: operating always in conversation with how the war has been constructed, the novels and stories challenge what has and has not been made visible by those in power and how these constructions have been rendered visible or invisible. At the same time, the texts perform a crucial intervention into the communication context, inhibiting the “discursive closure” threatened by the unchecked perpetuation of prominent Iraq War narratives throughout U.S. culture: “When discussion is thwarted,” writes Stanley Deetz, “a particular view of reality is maintained at the expense of equally plausible ones, usually to someone’s advantage.” At times directly and at others obliquely, the fictional narratives engage, interrogate, and critique official-media constructions of the Iraq War, thus challenging what has been accepted by the majority of American society as the “reality” of the conflict: its goals, the nature of the fighting, the enemy, American soldiers and veterans, etc. By revising, repurposing, and undermining the vocabulary, structure, tropes,
and techniques of dominant Iraq War discourse, the novels and stories I address in the following chapters alter the discursive landscape as they interact with it.

U.S. official-media narratives of the war, as the following chapter will demonstrate, have been constructed within a discursive context of binaristic absolutism that relies on a simplistic—but powerful—rhetoric of fear and evil. Frequently displayed in sound bites such as the “axis of evil,” this hyperbolic rhetoric instantiates what Chris Hedges refers to as the “hijacking of language,” a linguistic co-optation that “is fundamental to war,” as those in power strive “to create a politically correct lexicon” that resists penetration from those outside the cause. Within the context of the 2003 war in Iraq, this lexicon takes the form of what Henry Giroux calls “the language of patriotic correctness and religious fanaticism.” Evidence of “a growing authoritarianism” in the United States, such language constructed, and indeed continues to construct, a “war on terrorism” that belied notions of freedom and global democracy even as these concepts were employed as justification for American military intervention in Iraq and around the world. I argue that the novels and stories on which this study focuses resist this authoritarian impulse by working to reclaim language and discourse as tools for exploration, discovery, and challenge. In continuing the discussion about the Iraq War after its historical end and after those in positions of power have sought to conclude the conversation, the fictional texts operate in the service of a democratic tradition that values critical inquiry and adjudges open, informed debate a central part of a healthy, thriving society.

Tellingly, the Iraq War novels and stories here under discussion do not offer a single, unified conception of what was a far from unified war experience. They cohere, instead, in their commitment to critical, engaged representation of the conflict. In place of the neat and simplistically packaged war provided to audiences by official-media narratives, the fictions
substitute complex, often ambiguous counter-narratives that articulate the need for moving beyond closed-circuit, single-vision versions of the Iraq War and insist on continuing dialogue as the form that responsible narrative about the war must take. While official-media versions “hide” the mechanisms of their production, the fictions in question construct wars, soldiers, and veterans via strategies that reveal the apparatuses at work in the texts’ making. Ultimately, these texts not only lay bare the construction of war-as-narrative but also make plain the lie that is the tidy, official version of the Iraq War. In their repeated engagements with uncertainty, inconsistency, and doubt, the novels and stories explored in the following chapters offer new ways for thinking about the war in Iraq, as well as possibilities for the even more difficult work of thinking beyond war. In addition, their adaptations, both direct and indirect, of Vietnam War discourse highlight the contingent nature of all war narratives and the potential of fiction to serve as a positive intervening force in the cultural and political realities of the contemporary moment.

In the following chapter, I examine the processes at work in official-media constructions of the Iraq War and the dominant cultural narratives to which the fiction responds. This discussion will demonstrate how the war in Iraq developed discursively in the United States through modes of public communication directed by government and military elites and the mainstream media. It should also suggest the value, for this project, of engaging Iraq War fiction through formal analysis. By focusing on narrative technique, the present study investigates the methods by which fictional representations build competing constructions of the war. Moreover, each chapter considers contemporary war discourse within the context of at least one prominent Vietnam War narrative by way of investigating Vietnam’s discursive influence on the war in Iraq. In addition to formal analysis, I utilize feminist, sociological, and media studies methodologies to attend to particular aspects of the different primary texts.
In chapter two, I examine *Billy Lynn’s* indictment of American pop culture and consumer capitalism; analysis of the novel’s narrative fragmentation, point of view, and characterization, among other strategies, allows for a consideration of the role of spectacle and patriotism in the creation of the Iraq War in the American consciousness. This chapter explores the novel’s challenges to traditional masculinity, the war hero discourse, and the narrative construction of Iraq as a war of good vs. evil. In addition, I consider *Billy Lynn’s* critique of embedded reporting.

Chapter three investigates ways in which the U.S. military developed and perpetuated self-sustaining narratives of war; here I look at Abrams’ use of non-literary materials, genre-switching, and satire to highlight the military’s efforts to obscure and whitewash death and create tales of heroism. *Fobbit* employs numerous parallels with Vietnam-era literature to undermine the notion of the earlier war’s singularity and illustrate the discursive continuity between Vietnam and Iraq. Calling attention to war narratives’ artificiality and subjectivity, the novel challenges the dominant constructions of the war in American culture.

Finally, in chapter four, I consider *Redeployment’s* narrative structure, use of military jargon, metafictive techniques, and secondary characters to illustrate the damaged state of the American soldier and, by extension, his/her society. I employ the concept of moral injury to demonstrate the intertwining of soldier and civilian and the need for the war’s burden to be spread among the whole of U.S. society. Complicating notions of the Other and simplistic conceptions of the war, *Redeployment* suggests a path toward healing.

Because this project endeavors to study narrative technique, I would like to say a few words about satire, a mode employed, to some extent, in each of the fictional texts under discussion but here explored fully only in *Fobbit*. Northrop Frye identifies satire’s two components as “wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd” and “an
object of attack.” As the carnage of World War I prompted, according to Susanne Christine Puissant, “the breakdown of mimetic discourse,” satire increasingly gained traction in U.S. fiction as a mode for representing the horrifying and absurd nature of modern warfare. Edith Wharton’s “Writing a War Story” provides an early example, satirizing women’s war relief efforts during the First World War, and numerous well-known and well-regarded satires followed World War II, including Catch-22 by Joseph Heller and Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut, as well as Gravity’s Rainbow by Thomas Pynchon. Out of the war in Korea came Richard Hooker’s MASH, which serves as the basis for the Vietnam-era television show M*A*S*H, and in response to the Vietnam War, Norman Mailer’s Why Are We in Vietnam and Ursula K. Le Guin’s allegorical science fiction novel, The Word for World is Forest. Tom Paine’s Gulf War novel, The Pearl of Kuwait, was released around the time of the U.S.’s second invasion of Iraq, and, a year earlier, Gabe Hudson’s Dear Mr. President, a collection of stories focused on Gulf War Syndrome.

For authors of Iraq War fiction, the impulse toward satire has been at least as strong as for their predecessors, and Fountain, Abrams, and Klay have each garnered comparisons to Catch-22. Of the three, Fobbit utilizes the form in the most conspicuous manner, with one of its leading characters so over-the-top he “can almost be dismissed as a cartoon.” Billy Lynn and Klay’s “Money as a Weapons System” approach their satirical projects with greater subtlety. Fountain turns his gaze on American popular culture and the U.S. government—“think of the stories of Jessica Lynch or Pat Tillman, but amped up to Joseph Helleresque absurdity,” writes Adam Langer—while Klay lampoons military bureaucracy with “dark humor.” Each author’s use of satire makes an important contribution to his text and offers an important direction for study; however, in order to give this project sufficient breadth and examine the widest possible
range of narrative strategies, I have focused on a variety of techniques and limited my analysis of satire to *Fobbit* alone. The first part of chapter 3 examines Abrams’ satirizing of the contemporary American military’s numerical obsessions as a parallel to Vietnam-era discourse.

Before proceeding with an analysis of the discursive construction of the war, I would like, in the interest of transparency and thoroughness, to comment on three decisions that bear heavily on the end result of this project. The first is the choice to focus on fiction solely of the Iraq War and not also of the contemporaneous war in Afghanistan, which, because of similarities, for example, between the early Viet Cong and Taliban, might suggest itself as the more obvious choice for comparison. Two reasons for my choice are logistical: the relative lack of fictional representation of Afghanistan and, at the time this project was begun (early fall 2013), the war in Afghanistan’s ongoing status. As noted above, serious fiction often necessitates a longer incubation time than does nonfiction, requiring, on the part of both authors and readers, a lengthy period of reflection before its genesis and consumption, respectively. Perhaps, then, the Afghan war’s longer continuation was primarily responsible for the scant number of novels and stories addressing the conflict. The war, however, has since come to technical, if not actual, completion, and if history is any predictor, the official end of combat operations on December 28, 2014, seems to have signaled the coming of the first wave of serious fiction focusing on the Afghan war.

The most salient reason for the choice of Iraq is that my focus on the media has made it the more compelling companion to Vietnam. Comparisons of and allusions between the two conflicts made by the press, former President George W. Bush, and members of the American public reveal their interwovenness in the cultural psyche in a way that does not as clearly apply to the case of Afghanistan. Despite important differences, commentators repeatedly have linked
the American wars in Vietnam and Iraq as a result of their shared bases in “dubious assumptions” and executions marred by “policy errors,” with Iraq described as bringing about “déjà vu” of the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{33} Vietnam entered the public lexicon surrounding Iraq almost immediately following the March 19, 2003 invasion, and by year’s end outright comparisons of the two conflicts were common in public discourse. On March 29, 2003, for example, the term \textit{Vietnam} appeared four times in a 935-word \textit{Los Angeles Times} piece about the popularity of using public opinion polls to chart support for the war in Iraq,\textsuperscript{34} while newspaper headlines such as “Watching Iraq, Seeing Vietnam” appeared in major dailies in November 2003, if not earlier.\textsuperscript{35} Prominent political figures, Democrat and Republican alike, joined the public discussion by 2005, asserting the wars’ parallels on both television news programs and radio shows,\textsuperscript{36} and, most significantly, in late 2006, President Bush—who, with his administration, had previously been reticent to acknowledge the existence of any similarities—conceded in an interview on national television the possibility of an Iraq-Vietnam comparison.\textsuperscript{37} Less than one year later, in a speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), he invoked the Vietnam War in an effort to rally public support for staying the course in Iraq: “Here, at home,” he said, “some can argue our withdrawal from Vietnam carried no price to American credibility—but the terrorists see it differently.”\textsuperscript{38} This appeal to the nation’s veterans was, of course, more broadly an appeal to the many Americans who read about the speech in the next day’s papers or saw clips broadcast on their nightly news, and its challenge to the American ethos effectively entangled the still-evolving narrative of the war in Vietnam with the unfolding story of the war in Iraq.

This project’s focus on U.S. media and culture has likewise impacted the second decision that here bears mentioning. There exist a number of Iraq War-related fictions written by non-American authors, such as 2014’s \textit{The Corpse Exhibition} by Iraqi-born Finnish national Hassim
Blasim; while consideration of these works, particularly those representing non-Western points of view, is important and necessary, such consideration is beyond the scope of this project. The current study limits itself to the work of American writers, who because of their historical and cultural positions are immersed in American culture, society, politics, and economics. These authors and their resulting narratives are necessarily influenced by and implicated in national discourses of the Iraq War.

Finally, a few words on terminology. Journalists, politicians, and pundits the world over have variously dubbed the American military engagement in Iraq an “operation,” “invasion,” “war on,” “war in,” and “occupation,” among other things. In keeping with much of the fiction, news product, and critical work being published in the United States at the present time, I have selected the term *Iraq War* and, following from it, *war in Iraq* for use in this project. Such a rhetorical decision is not without implications, but my choice is one of expediency rather than ideology. The term is a neutral designator, meant to imply neither approval nor condemnation of the U.S. military effort. Although *Second Persian Gulf War* and *Gulf War II* would serve such an end equally well, the former phrase is unnecessarily cumbersome, while the latter has been used by few others writing about the conflict. For the sake of clarity and consistency, I have chosen a term with which audiences of both American news media and fiction will have familiarity. I use it inclusively to designate both the period referred to by official, media, and now, following the war’s end, historical sources as “major combat operations” (March 19–May 1, 2003) and the occupation phase (May 2, 2003–December 13, 2011) that followed. When a differentiation between phases is in order, I have made the distinction clear; in all other instances, *Iraq War* refers to the conflict as a whole.
Notes

1 The presently ongoing American-led intervention in Iraq began in 2014 in response to attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL); the U.S. government distinguishes it from the 2003 Iraq War, though various commentators debate whether it should be considered a continuation of the war. The texts under discussion in this project contend with the earlier conflict.

2 More popular fictions such as spy novels, thrillers, and mysteries centered on or drawing their inspiration from the war in Iraq, however, have been published in abundance since not long after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

3 For the sake of clarity and readability, I use the word soldier as a generic term to refer to any member of the U.S. Armed Forces, regardless of branch of service (or rank), despite the fact that it does not, in proper military terminology, refer to Air Force, Marine, or Navy forces. This move is not meant to demonstrate preference for Army troops over the other types of servicemen and women who served and are represented in the fiction and other works about the Iraq War; rather I have chosen it for ease of use. My discussion of Klay’s Redeployment, whose action focuses on numerous Marines as well as Army personnel, is an exception to this practice.


6 Though primarily composed of fiction addressing the war in Iraq, the collection does include two stories about Afghanistan, Siobhan Fallon’s “Tips for a Smooth Transition” and Ted Janis’s “Raid.”


10 Nominated in nine categories, Bigelow’s film received six Oscars in 2008, including Best Director and Picture of the Year; it also earned more than seventy-five nominations from over fifty institutions across North America, Europe, and East Asia. Morris won the Silver Berlin Bear at the 2008 Berlin International Film Festival, and Standard Operating Procedure earned nominations from the 2009 Broadcast Film Critics Associations Awards and the 2009 Toronto Film Festival Awards, among others. Fick’s memoir was awarded the Barnes & Noble Discover New Writers Award in 2005.

11 Percy’s “Refresh, Refresh,” which would become the title story of his later collection and was originally published in the Paris Review in 2005, is an exception; it was awarded the 2005 Pushcart and Plimpton prizes and appeared in 2006 in The Best American Short Stories. Ben Fountain’s Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk and Kevin Powers’s The Yellow Birds were both finalists for the 2012 National Book Award, and Fountain’s book won the 2012 National Book Critics’ Circle Award.


collection of short fiction, and an edited collection of stories. While he includes Lea Carpenter’s *Eleven Days* in his discussion, this novel concerns the U.S. war in Afghanistan, not Iraq.

15 Luckhurst, “In War Times,” 722. Despite the subtitle of Luckhurst’s essay—“Fictionalizing Iraq”—his analysis includes some works on Afghanistan.

16 John Frow, “The Uses of Terror and the Limits of Cultural Studies,” *Symploke*, 11 no. 1/2 (2003): 75. Hereafter, all emphases are original to the text unless otherwise noted.

17 Poetry also offers a valuable approach to the war, though given my focus on narrative, my project is limited to fiction. For especially well-received Iraq War poetry, see veteran-author Brian Turner’s two collections, *Here, Bullet* (2005) and *Phantom Noise* (2010), both published by Alice James Books, and former Army National Guardsman Hugh Martin’s *The Stick Soldiers* (BOA Editions, 2013).


19 The narrator of “Money as a Weapons System,” one of the longer stories in *Redeployment*, is a civilian working as a Foreign Services Officer.

20 Abrams’ military service began well before the Iraq War. See chapter 3, note 6.

21 Stanley Deetz, *Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonization: Developments in Communication and the Politics of Everyday Life* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1992), 188. Deetz continues, “It should not be surprising that systems of domination are protected from careful exploration and political advantage is protected and extended” (ibid.)

22 Within the context of this project, the conflating of diverse outlets such as Fox News Channel and the *New York Times* under a single banner is deliberate; as chapter one will demonstrate, U.S. mainstream media as a whole, irrespective of the political bents of specific markets, contributed to the development and perpetuation of dominant Iraq war narratives.


29 In contrast to the majority of reviews, Lokesson asserts that the novel “is not a satire, despite its marketing hype.” Lokesson, “Passive Aggression.” According to Donald Anderson, professor of creative writing at the United States Air Force Academy, during a personal conversation I had with him at the American Literature Association Symposium on War and American Literature (Oct. 10–12, 2013, New Orleans, LA), author Ben Fountain revealed to him in conversation that *Billy Lynn* was not intended as satire but rather as a realistic portrayal of the people and events Fountain saw around him in Texas.


The differences are numerous and still being debated by historians and political scientists (among others), but some of the most obvious and frequently mentioned include the number of American soldiers killed (approximately 58,000 in Vietnam vs. 4500 in Iraq) and the military’s reliance on an all-volunteer force during the Iraq War as opposed to a largely drafted force during Vietnam.


Republican Senator Chuck Hagel argued the wars’ similarities on ABC’s This Week, while Democratic National Committee chairman Howard Dean did so on WOAI-AM in San Antonio.

During a one-on-one interview on ABC News, George Stephanopoulos questioned the president about a claim made that day by New York Times op-ed columnist Thomas Friedman that the bloody events of October 2006 were “the jihadist equivalent of the Tet offensive.” President Bush responded that Friedman “could be right. There’s certainly a stepped up level of violence, and we’re heading into an election.” ABC News, “George Stephanopoulos’ Full Interview with President Bush,” ABC News, October 22, 2006, accessed November 11, 2013, http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/story?id=2594541. For Friedman’s column, see “Barney and Baghdad,” New York Times, October 18, 2006, accessed November 6, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/18/opinion/18friedman.html?_r=0.


The Canadian CBC, for example, called it the “War on Iraq,” while Arab commentators referred to it as an “invasion” and “occupation” (Kellner, “Foreword,” xv).

Some critics may object to my desire for a neutral term to designate such an ideologically fraught conflict; indeed, some will charge that the use of such a term is, itself, an ideological choice. Their objection is well noted. My interest in this project, however, is to investigate the constructions of the war in public discourse and fictional texts as independently as possible of my own political biases and ideological leanings. As such, my choice of terminology is deliberately non-evaluative. For a brief discussion of the politics of attaching a name to the war, see Howard Tumber and Jerry Palmer, The Media at War: The Iraq Crisis (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2004), 1.
CHAPTER 1
OFFICIAL-MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF THE 2003 IRAQ WAR

From a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August.
— Andrew Card

When our own nation is at war with any other, we detest them under the character of cruel, perfidious, unjust and violent: But always esteem ourselves and allies equitable, moderate, and merciful.
— David Hume

When asked why the United States government did not censor media coverage during the war in Vietnam, President Johnson lamented, “Because we are fools.” The administration found itself in a tough position, however: it could not censor news of a war it denied was actually a war. At the start of the 1960s, President Kennedy had tried to limit press access in Vietnam; seeking to avoid negative coverage of American involvement in the conflict, the young president “instituted an information policy…that released as little information as possible about combat operations and sought to make the South Vietnamese government the source of that information as much as possible.” The plan backfired though and, according to John Mecklin, “led to just the critical coverage that Kennedy had hoped to avoid.” The Johnson administration in the years following, “rejected censorship,” explains Chester J. Pach, Jr., “because they doubted it would work and even feared that it would provoke a backlash of hostile commentary.” As the war progressed, the U.S. government adopted a policy of “maximum candor” regarding the press. Under this policy, the military revealed as much information about the war effort “as was consistent with the requirements of security.” The degree to which officials showed genuine candor in their dealings with reporters, however, varied a great deal, and, as Mecklin points out, the goal “was to make the press dependent on official information about the war.” Nonetheless,
the policy opened the door to the journalistic access to military personnel and the battlefield that has become synonymous with Vietnam War media coverage.

The United States would fight in Bosnia, Somalia, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and elsewhere before undertaking its next “television war” nearly thirty years after Vietnam. With the 2003 War in Iraq, during which more than seven hundred embedded journalists lived and traveled with troops at the front, technology both on and off the battlefield allowed for striking advances in coverage. Embed Walter Rodgers, for example, relayed his experience of informing soldiers of the U.S. Army 7th Cavalry division that the war in Iraq had begun: “CNN viewers in the United States and around the world actually knew about the attack on Baghdad…before any of the soldiers here in the field.”

Helmet cams gave viewers a first-person shooter perspective on the war, while the Internet offered countless outlets for news consumers. But the American media served a far more complex role vis-à-vis the war in Iraq than simply that of information provider, and, while former President George W. Bush would claim in February 2017 that the media is “indispensable to democracy” and necessary “to hold people like me to account,” fifteen years earlier, in the wake of September 11, Bush’s press secretary Ari Fleischer enjoined “all Americans”—and his comments were directed most especially at journalists—“to watch what they say, watch what they do.”

This chapter examines the processes at work in official-media construction of the Iraq War and the dominant narratives of war to which the fiction responds. Using research in media studies, political science, and history; President Bush’s public addresses and interviews; and contemporary newspaper articles, television broadcasts, and other primary media sources, this discussion will demonstrate how the war in Iraq developed discursively in the United States via modes of public communication directed by government and military elites and the mainstream
media. I focus primarily on the time period between 9/11 and the end of major combat operations in May, 2003, as well as the first two years of the occupation, although other time periods are mentioned throughout. The analysis begins with the problematic role played by the press in contemporary American society in the current age of corporate-media integration; the chapter then moves into an exploration of how the alignment of major U.S. media outlets with politics contributed to the shaping of the Iraq War in public discourse. The next section details the development of three primary narratives of war in American cultural discourse: Iraq as a war on terror, a war of us vs. them, and a war of liberation. In the final section, a discussion of embedded reporting and patriotism illuminates the influence of the Vietnam War in the discursive construction of the war in Iraq and the ways in which the political-media establishment garnered the American public’s support for the conflict.

**The Not-So-Independent Press**

A common, idealized notion of the press in the contemporary U.S. positions journalists as “watchdogs”: operating independently of centralized institutions of power, they serve the public interest by bringing to light and raising questions about the actions of those in government, big business, and other positions of influence. As such, journalists curtail the otherwise unimpeded ability of the powerful to act solely on their own behalf and thus protect individual and group liberties. Guided by the prevailing journalistic norm of objectivity, as well as the attendant standards of fairness and balance, members of the press offer the public a variety of viewpoints on subjects of import, uninflected by their own personal opinions, political leanings, or belief systems. In its idealized form, journalism provides Americans the information required to make
educated decisions on matters of public concern and, by extension, enable their meaningful participation in social and political life.

Within the United States’ current print, radio, internet, cable, and network news environments, however, the realities of journalism differ from the utopia described above. Among modern day experts and practitioners, debates rage over the possibility, value, even exact meaning of journalistic “objectivity.” Although although objectivity is “the invisible altar” of U.S. journalism, objectivity is also the most highly contested value taught in American journalism schools, and for good reason. Cable news outlets—with Fox News as the leading, but far from only, example—offer clear illustrations of the political biases displayed by American media establishments, and although the field maintains as its gold standard a neutral, disinterested approach to news coverage, even highly regarded newspapers such as the New York Times (NYT) and the Washington Post have widely recognized political leanings (to the left and the right, respectively).

The failure of objectivity in contemporary American news reporting, however, inheres in a phenomenon far more complex than the inability or unwillingness of reporters, anchors, and editors to suppress their party leanings. At its most basic level, the objectivity standard calls for journalists to keep their personal feelings and prejudices out of a news story and to present only the facts. But as Brent Cunningham, managing editor of the Columbia Journalism Review, observes, this principle allows journalists to become “passive recipients of news, rather than aggressive analyzers and explainers of it.” Seeking to avoid charges of bias, many journalists opt for the most banal “he-said/she-said reporting” which, as Alex S. Jones notes, “just pits one voice against another.” Such reporting answers the call for balance but does not bring audiences closer to knowing what is true in a given instance. Indeed, interpretation and analysis
are two of journalists’ most crucial tasks. They help to shape audience understanding of key figures and events and of situations about which the public might otherwise have little or no knowledge.

While information delivery of the above-described nature appears to be objective in the most basic sense of the word—impartial, detached—it is, in actuality, very much skewed. Audiences may receive two sides of a story, but the stories are not just any stories; rather they are stories sourced largely from officialdom. The facts, then, pertain to those issues selected for prominence by individuals in the government and military. In presenting only these pieces of information and failing to analyze their meaning or situate them within a larger context, journalists often unwittingly advance the agendas of those in power. (In the following section, I elaborate on this phenomenon of framing specifically with regard to the war in Iraq.)

Lack of objectivity is only the most obvious symptom of an issue rooted in American society’s entrenchment in an increasingly profit-driven, globalized economic context: the entanglement of the media with the U.S. government-military-industrial complex. Beginning in 1981 with the extension of television licenses from three years to five years, Reagan-era deregulation of the radio and television industries removed many governmental checks on broadcasting, particularly, with the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) 1987 abolition of the Fairness Doctrine, the requirement that broadcasters operate in the public interest. Since then, according to Douglas Kellner, deregulatory policies have significantly contributed to a steady process of “concentration, conglomeratization, and commercialization of the mainstream media,” resulting in what is now commonly referred to as the “corporate media”—media owned by corporate behemoths such as today’s Comcast Corporation, the nation’s largest provider of cable television and residential internet service and owner of
Conglomeratization of the various media forms—including print journalism, magazines, television, film, radio, the book industry, and internet news—under a few uber-powerful corporate heads has severely restricted competition in the information industry and decreased the diversity of views available in the marketplace.

Far from contributing to a much decried “liberal media bias,” this corporate-media integration has led to the steady conservativizing of the news. Mainstream media outlets, explains Kellner, “express the corporate point of view and advance the agendas of the organizations that own them and the politicians who they support and in turn who pursue the interests of the media conglomerates.” Moreover, with profit as the primary motivator, media establishments focus on news that is germane to the aims of advertisers and the desires of audiences, excluding content antagonistic to these aims and desires. Whatever the liberal leanings of specific journalists and editors, individual employees of this rank command only so much power over the news agenda within the structures of a gigantic corporate-media system that operates at the behest of business and elite interests.

Constructing the Iraq War in the Press

Given the contemporary entanglement of U.S. media outlets with military, government, and big business interests, it is not surprising that the mainstream media played a significant role in garnering support for the 2003 Iraq War. Critics have variously charged that “…American
journalism ease[d] the way” for the U.S. invasion of Iraq;\textsuperscript{26} that the Bush administration was “aided and abetted” by the media in procuring public support for going to war;\textsuperscript{27} and that the push toward war was “consciously organized” by the government and the corporate media.\textsuperscript{28} Regardless of the degree of purposefulness one attributes to them, scholarly consensus views the mainstream media as a whole as having failed to question seriously the Bush administration in the lead-up to the invasion and, once the conflict was underway, continued to toe the official line for years, even as evidence mounted against the administration’s claims. Of course, notable examples of scrupulous, independent-minded journalism by individuals within the mainstream press and by the alternative media exist, but on the whole such efforts did little to alter the political landscape, and even a storied, left-leaning publication such as the \textit{New York Times} supported the war.\textsuperscript{29} For their part, Bush and his top officials, according to David Dadge, “refuse[d] to accept the media’s ‘check and balance’ role,” viewing the press instead as “merely a medium relaying a particular message.”\textsuperscript{30}

An analysis by Andrew Tyndall shows that fewer than 10\% of the 414 Iraq-related stories broadcast on the three major American television networks between September 2002 and February 2003 originated from outside the White House, Pentagon, or State Department.\textsuperscript{31} The media’s overwhelming reliance—here, during those months most critical in the administration’s march toward war—on stories generated within official channels signals the extent to which they deferred to the government and military’s framing of issues surrounding Iraq. A frame serves as an organizing structure used by individuals to process information, develop opinions, and make decisions about topics. Frames do not arise naturally in tandem with or in response to given issues; rather they are chosen and shaped by public actors such as political and media elites. Robert Entman explains that to “frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and to
make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” Political leaders, lobbyists, military heads, corporate spokespeople, and so on, have considerable interest (monetary and otherwise) in casting issues in ways that benefit them and their causes. Because, as Donald R. Kinder explains, frames determine “how citizens understand an issue—which features of it are central and which are peripheral[,]…what the problem is and how to think about it,” frames supply and limit the range of responses available to people.

Individuals in positions of power and prominence, then, use frames to construct—as opposed to reflect—the social, cultural, economic, and political realities of the citizen population. In the case of Iraq, government and military leaders were keenly attuned to the role of framing in shaping the political climate. “Strategic framing,” for example, served as the “fourth pillar” of the Pentagon’s publicity campaign, while the political communications strategy of Karl Rove, President Bush’s Deputy Chief of Staff, focused on achieving what Bill Israel calls the “right picture.” In a September 7, 2002 interview, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card (quoted in the chapter epigraph above) comments on the White House’s decision to withhold the official introduction of its long-determined Iraq policy until the time considered most favorable to swaying public opinion in its favor—the days immediately preceding the president’s one-year September 11th anniversary speech to the nation.

Much of frames’ strength and danger inheres in the fact that they appear to offer the natural, obvious, and only ways of thinking about public concerns, such as war, and that, as a result, they frequently go unchallenged by the populace. In the case of Iraq in late 2002 and early 2003, though, the frames chosen by the Bush administration also were unchallenged by the
mainstream media. In allowing state and military officials to select the central aspects of reality without question or challenge, the media abrogated its watchdog responsibility and permitted the administration to set the terms of debate vis-à-vis the so-called threat of Iraq. The construction in American culture and consciousness of the ensuing military conflict, then, proceeded almost entirely along official lines.

Once the war commenced, the dangers inherent in issue framing were multiplied many times over as a result of the media’s near-complete dependence on official sources. Adel Iskander asserts that the major television outlets primarily “relied on military informants, Central Command (CENTCOM) press conferences and releases, reports from embedded reporters, in-house military generals, and government officials who relayed a coherent view of the war and how it was progressing,” in spite of often contradictory and conflicting evidence regarding the situation on the ground. Considerable deference was granted to retired military personnel, among them four-star generals Norman Schwarzkopf (at NBC), Wesley K. Clark (CNN), and Joseph W. Ralston (CBS). These (well-paid) analysts offered almost no question about the legitimacy or necessity of the war effort; on those occasions when they did take issue with the administration’s war plan, it was usually to assert the need for a greater commitment of troops or a different strategic approach to the conflict. Moreover, pro-war sources (particularly official ones) received the majority of airtime, to the considerable exclusion of more moderate and anti-war voices, and the same held true for the balance of views in print sources. A May 2003 study conducted by the media watch group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) on three weeks’ worth of television news stories about Iraq found that of 1617 sources cited, 63% were official, whether current or former, civilian or military; and of the 840 American officials referenced, only four displayed anti-war positions. This sort of skewed representation of views
significantly limited the range of opinion available to the public, in large part eliminating access to serious challenges to the war effort, even as more than a quarter of the American people (to say nothing of the global population) opposed it.

Leading the way in the promotion of the Bush administration’s war narrative were cable and network news channels, which (along with local news) served as the most popular source of news for Americans. Iraq-related television coverage typically followed a template described by Danny Schecter: “Make a claim. Reinforce it with experts, usually the same ones over and over again. Marginalize all dissent. Narrow the range of debate. Use emotive language inciting fears. Make the only option ‘us’ versus ‘them.’” Repetition, simplification, charged language—these rhetorical tactics were central to the forging of the war narrative. If weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) were Saddam’s supposed tool of choice, fear was the one preferred by the Bush administration and uncritically adopted by the media outlets that reported the administration’s claims, excerpted its addresses, and hosted its members. From the mushroom cloud evoked by writers Michael R. Gordon and Judith Miller in the NYT, then by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice on CNN’s Late Edition; to the unpatriotic brand stamped on those who failed to support unquestioningly the invasion and occupation, the administration and the mainstream press wielded fear as a coercive and powerful rhetorical weapon against a vulnerable-feeling and already frightened American public.

The conservative Fox News Channel (FNC), which swiftly ascended the U.S. cable news ratings after 9/11, served as the poster child for Bush-friendly treatment of the Iraq situation, not only because of its openly pro-administration stance but also because of other networks’ efforts to beat Fox at its own game. “In much the same way the military trained its personnel before the launch of the war,” writes Iskander, “FNC employed its coverage to rally populist support for the
war. Anchors became political commentators; news bulletins were packed with ideology and political partisanship.”

Tom Carson and Chris Kaye go so far as to invoke a comparison with Nazi Germany: “Demonizing contrasting viewpoints is the channel’s polemical specialty even in peacetime, and in wartime it’s pretty much ‘Goebbels, bar the door.’”

But as Carson and Kaye point out, Fox News was far from the only station to approach the war in this fashion. The coverage of the entire mainstream media resembled that of an authoritarian state—the only difference being that U.S. outlets required no coercion to report in such a fashion. Indeed, while FNC offers the most obvious target for indictment of pro-Bush Iraq War coverage, other channels excelled in their attempts to “outfox Fox.” Described by one critic as “second to none in waving the flag at every opportunity,” MSNBC, for example, axed the popular host Phil Donahue on the eve of the invasion because, according to an internal company memo, his show “provid[ed] a home for the liberal antiwar agenda.”

Even the fact that Donahue garnered higher ratings, and presumably higher ad revenues, than any other show on the network could not save his “bleeding heart” in a time war.

**Dominant American Narratives of the Iraq War**

The rhetorical construction in public discourse of the Iraq War began well before the first bombs were dropped in March 2003 over Baghdad. Two narratives of war that reigned supreme prior to the invasion and throughout major combat operations (March 20–May 1, 2003) began to take shape in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. These narratives—war in Iraq as an extension of the “war on terror” and as a war of “good vs. evil”—developed more fully and coherently in late 2002 and early 2003 by means of more than a dozen presidential addresses and a slew of televised appearances by high-
ranking administration spokespeople, and their prominence depended on the compliance of major print and broadcast media outlets. These two narratives of war were inextricably intertwined, bolstering one another in important ways.

To some extent, these prevailing constructions of the Iraq War had their roots much earlier than the post-9/11 political climate. The nation’s experience of the Vietnam War, including its continued cultural impact, profoundly influenced the ways in which government and military officials conceived of war in Iraq and the methods by which officials—and thus, the media—presented the Iraq War to the American public. Key among these tactics were the use of embedded reporters and the appeal to patriotism, which proved particularly successful techniques for maintaining pro-administration versions of the war once fighting commenced. These strategies assisted also in the promulgation of a third principal narrative: Iraq as a war of liberation. Having received comparatively little emphasis in early war rhetoric, this construction came to increasing prominence in 2004, following the failure of coalition forces to discover the much-touted WMDs in Iraq and the 9/11 commission’s report that it had found no evidence of links between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. At this point, discursive focus shifted to Saddam Hussein’s decades-long tyranny over his people, and the war was cast as deliverance of an oppressed Iraqi populace. George Lakoff identifies this as a shift from “a self-defense narrative,” in which the United States was “both Victim and Hero,” to “a rescue narrative,” with the U.S. as hero and the Iraqi people as victims.

Beginning in late 2002, the Bush administration began to frame potential war with Iraq as an extension of the “global war on terror” already underway in Afghanistan and originally begun as a response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. Administration rhetoric over the next six months both implicitly and explicitly aligned Iraqi president Saddam Hussein with al Qaeda,
Osama bin Laden, and terrorism. Bolstered by what would eventually be known as the “Big Lie”—stories of Saddam’s purported supply of illegal WMDs—these rhetorical maneuvers forged connections between Iraq and the events of 9/11, playing on the American people’s anger about the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and their considerable fear of future terrorist attacks. At this historical juncture, write Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner, “the terrorism frame was available, believable, and understandable to a country scarred by September 11, making the frame powerful and convincing,”\(^5\) and it helped the administration procure public support for the invasion of Iraq.

As with the other primary discursive constructions this chapter will examine, President Bush supplied the foundation for war in Iraq as war on terror through public addresses that were first televised, then excerpted in print and online media, and later discussed in television news studios by government and military officials, news anchors, and TV personalities. The president did not explicitly blame Saddam Hussein for the 9/11 attacks or, in most instances, even assert a direct link between the Iraqi leader and al Qaeda—he did not have to: his speeches were structured and worded in such a way as to lead audiences to draw this connection for themselves.\(^5\)

Bush’s September 12, 2002 address to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly—which followed his brief but important remarks to the American people on the one-year anniversary of September 11 the day before—served as a powerful launching point for the Iraq-related war-on-terror rhetoric and the United States’ drive toward invasion. Over the course of five sentences, the president segues from “the attacks on America a year ago” to (hypothetical) “terrorists…plotting further destruction” to the fear of an “outlaw regime” who will aid these terrorists in acquiring weapons to “one place and one regime, [where] we find these dangers in
their most lethal and aggressive forms.” That place/regime is, of course, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Bush then makes the case for military action, devoting approximately half of his 2400-word speech to an enumeration of Saddam’s violations of the Iraqi people’s rights, Middle Eastern peace, global safety, and UN resolutions. References to terrorism appear five times in the course of this inventory, while those to weapons of mass destruction appear three times, and weapons of mass murder and the most terrible weapons are each mentioned once. Just prior to closing with the United States’ vow to make a “stand” against Iraq, the president again invokes the specter of 9/11: “With every step the Iraqi regime takes toward gaining and deploying the most terrible weapons, our own options to confront that regime will narrow. And if an emboldened regime were to supply these weapons to terrorist allies, then the attacks of September 11 would be a prelude to far greater horrors.”

The juxtapositions, hypothesizing, and conditional language in Bush’s UN speech offered a glimpse of the rhetorical footwork of his later addresses. According to an analysis by Gershkoff and Kushner, half of the dozen speeches given by the president from this point until the end of major combat operations the following May reference September 11 and Iraq in the same paragraph. Gershkoff and Kushner also find that all but one of his speeches during this period mention terrorism and Iraq in the same paragraph, with most utilizing them in the same sentence. The terms’ proximity to one another suggests to Bush’s audience their interconnectedness without the president’s overtly claiming that connection, and it leads the public to infer Iraq/Saddam Hussein’s involvement in the attacks of 9/11 without the president having opened himself up to those critics who would challenge direct, un-evidenced assertions to this effect.
And as much as repeated references to September 11 lend to the president’s rhetoric a backwards-looking quality, it is the continual return to what Paul R. Pillar terms “fear of a hypothetical future transfer of weapons,”57 along with the nightmarish results such a transfer could entail, that imbue Bush’s language on this subject with its full apocalyptic power. The president’s January, 28, 2003 State of the Union speech delivers a grim example of this sort of hypothesizing:

Before September the 11th, many in the world believed that Saddam Hussein could be contained. But chemical agents, lethal viruses and shadowy terrorist networks are not easily contained. Imagine those nineteen hijackers with other weapons and other plans—this time armed by Saddam Hussein. It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known.58

In the third sentence, Bush looks both backwards to 9/11 as he enjoins his audience to “Imagine those nineteen hijackers,” a clear reference to the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks; and forward to a hypothetical future instance of terrorism “with other weapons and other plans, this time armed by Saddam Hussein.” As Pillar contends, statements of this type are “not very amenable to either support or refutation through facts and analysis.”59 They create a sort of black-hole into which reason and logic are swallowed—because they can never be proven false, only proven true if the worst comes to pass. The typical response to anyone arguing against the likelihood of a WMD transfer, then, “is that the potential consequences of [these weapons] getting into the hands of terrorist groups are so severe that the possibility must be countered no matter how low the probability.”60

The mainstream media took up the purported connection between Iraq and terrorism with minimal critical inquiry and, in many cases, much enthusiasm. Dadge notes the tendency, in the
lead-up to war, of both national and local newspapers to follow the “pyramid” structure in their reporting on Iraq-related issues: quotes and claims of administration officials—deemed most important to the stories—were placed at the beginning, while the assertions of administration critics were placed in the middle or much later. A structure appropriate for “a social story on a tire factory or safety at work,” the pyramid is insufficient for contextualizing “a story on national security.” Given news consumers’ penchant for reading little more than an article’s headline and opening paragraphs (hence the value and prominence of the pyramid in printed news), the consistent relegation of opposing viewpoints to the middle or end of a news story indicated that administration positions faced little or no challenge from others. Exacerbating the problems associated with story structure was the media’s characterization of official claims about Iraq and WMDs. Six weeks before the launch of the March invasion, for example, FAIR reported that the print and television news “media’s intensive coverage of the U.N. inspections [in Iraq] has repeatedly glided from reporting the allegation that Iraq is hiding banned weapons materials to repeating it as a statement of fact” (emphasis added). The FAIR report continued, “Through constant repetition of phrases like ‘the search for Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction,’ the media convey to the public the impression that the alleged banned weapons on which the Bush administration rests its case for war are known to exist and that the question is simply whether inspectors are skillful enough to find them.” Based on the consumption of mainstream news sources, the average lay U.S. citizen would easily have been under the impression that WMDs in Iraq were a foregone conclusion.

Beyond reporting as fact administration claims regarding Iraq and WMDs, TV commentators, print journalists, and op-ed columnists eagerly embraced the Iraq-as-war-on-terror frame. In early October 2002, for example, Bill O’Reilly, host of FNC’s The O’Reilly
Factor, used the 9/11 terrorist attacks as justification for invading Iraq through some rhetorical footwork of his own, establishing an analogy between September 11 and the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. When asked by O’Reilly whether diplomacy would have been a better option than entering World War II for the United States, a Democratic congresswoman noted that the Japanese had “struck Pearl Harbor,” underscoring the distinction between the nature of the United States’ entrance into WWII and its would-be involvement in the “preemptive” war proposed against Iraq. As justification for action against Saddam Hussein, O’Reilly replied, “And we got wiped out at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon”—his implication being that Iraq was responsible for the attacks of September 11 just as Japan was for the attack on Pearl Harbor.

During the same period in which the administration began laying the discursive (and military) groundwork for an extended war on terror against Saddam Hussein, President Bush, in his 2002 State of the Union speech, denounced Iraq as part of an “axis of evil” that also included Iran and North Korea. The now-famous reference to a group of “evil” nations threatening world safety, bent on procuring nuclear weapons, and aligned with terrorists, reinforced a second central narrative: the war in Iraq as a war of “good vs. evil.” This Manichean construction was the most pervasive of a number of “us vs. them” binaries that positioned the United States (“us”) against Iraq (“them”) generally and tyranny, repression, fear, savagery, and radical Islam specifically. The U.S. in this formulation was equated with those traits deemed positive from a conventional American standpoint, including democracy, equality, freedom, civilization, and, foremost, Christianity.

From this last context, the religious, the most powerful incarnation of the us vs. them mentality arose. An evangelical, “born-again” Christian, President Bush was very vocal about
the role of faith and religion in his personal life and politics. He consistently invoked his faith and Christian principles to explain and support his policies, and references to the Bible and to God figured frequently in his public addresses. Bush conceived the United States as a special nation set on a divinely inspired course. In the dualistic mindset of this “president of good and evil,” as Peter Singer has called him, any opposition to America’s course was by definition evil, and the Iraq War was no exception. Robert Ivie characterizes the war as “a test of Christian faith and of faith in a fellow Christian,” arguing that “it was no more and no less than a war waged against evil, a fight to preserve the nation’s soul as personified in its president.” The power of this narrative/rhetoric among the American people is not altogether difficult to comprehend in light of the country’s demographics: more than 75% of the population during Bush’s first term self-identified as Christian, while 67% considered the U.S. a “Christian nation.” Moreover, 53% of the public anticipated “the imminent return of Jesus Christ, accompanied by the fulfillment of biblical prophesies concerning the cataclysmic destruction of all that is wicked”—lending to a battle against evil, in the form of a war against Iraq, a certain pre-ordained, apocalyptic quality. While the concept of evil need not necessarily carry theological implications, what surer nod to its intended religious undertones than the “crusade” against evil that Bush announced only five days after 9/11?

Bush’s first application of the term evil to Saddam Hussein reveals the centrality of the media in the promulgation of the good vs. evil narrative with regard to the Iraq War. The president made the statement in an interview with Newsweek in November 2001, just two and a half months after the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., and it was widely reported online, in newspapers, and on television. The nature in which the comment was elicited belies the popular notion of the press as mere puppet of the Bush administration, evidencing
instead the crucial role the media played in advancing the popular and powerful war-on-evil frame:

Newsweek (NW): Do you think that Saddam Hussein is evil and that we should expand this [the fight against terrorism] to Iraq?

George W. Bush (GWB): I think Saddam Hussein is up to no good. I think he’s got weapons of mass destruction, and I think he needs to open up his country to let us inspect. I think he needs to be held accountable and needs to conform to the agreement he made years ago. That’s what he ought to do. It’s up to him to prove he’s not.

He’s the one guy in recent history who has used weapons of mass destruction not only against his neighbor, Iran, but against people in his own country. He gassed them.

NW: Why wouldn’t you say he’s evil, then?

GWB: He ain’t good.

NW: Why stop short of using the word?

GWB: I think maybe because you’re trying to force me to say it, and I’m stubborn….He is evil. Saddam’s evil.75

Here the interviewer, not Bush, introduces the issue of evil into the discussion, and, when Bush opts for a more nuanced explanation of Saddam, the interviewer repeats the term evil. When the president again demurs, this time choosing a colloquial and somewhat less polarizing description of the Iraqi president (“He ain’t good”), the interviewer persists, and finally Bush concedes the point.

Whatever Bush’s discomfort interacting with members of the press, it seems too much to suggest that, in a private interview, the president of the United States was cowed into calling Saddam Hussein evil. Still, the interviewer’s persistence is telling. While in this early instance
Bush preferred to avoid simplistic, inflammatory language, for the interviewer, the talk of evil offered a convenient—indeed, ready-made—framework for discussing threats to/enemies of the United States, whether real or potential. A well-known narrative from the war on terror, good vs. evil, transferred easily to the situation with Iraq, as evidenced by the way in which the above comments are rendered in *Newsweek*’s final profile of the president and Mrs. Bush. Following a paragraph about the ongoing war in Afghanistan and the hunt for “the evil one,” bin Laden, the profile continues:

In the meantime, what about Iraq? In his interview with *Newsweek*, the president for the first time declared that “Saddam is evil.” In Bush’s moral algebra, that would seem to mean he’s a legitimate, indeed necessary, target. “I think Saddam is up to no good,” Bush declared. “I think he’s got weapons of mass destruction. And I think he needs to open up his country to let us inspect... Show the world he’s not [evil]. It’s up to him to prove he’s not.”

“Declared” is an overly strong characterization of the president’s use of the word *evil* in the interview, and the profile excludes any mention of the context surrounding Bush’s comment, including the interviewer’s rather dogged efforts at drawing it out. As it appears in the published piece—immediately after a paragraph that mentions September 11, bin Laden (twice), evil, and the Taliban (twice)—Bush’s “declaration” about Saddam reads like a logical extension of the discussion of the war on terror. It provided the magazine a narrative that was easy to sell to an inflamed public that had for months been inundated with talk of evil terrorists.

The repeated invocation of evil in official-media Iraq War discourse functioned as what Richard J. Bernstein calls an “abuse of evil,” which “instead of inviting us to question and to *think*…is being used to stifle *thinking.*” The simplification of complex issues into stark opposites
depends on a binaristic mentality that is dangerous because it “lacks nuance, subtlety, and judicious discrimination.” Because the blunt dichotomy between good and absolute evil admits no shadings, all suggestions of complexity “are (mis) taken as signs of wavering, weakness, and indecision.”

Within a discursive context animated by this tenet, Americans by default find themselves aligned with evil if they fail wholly to agree with or conform to whatever is identified as “good,” a sentiment expressed in contemporary discourse perhaps nowhere as clearly as in President Bush’s September 20, 2001 ultimatum: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”

The narrative of the Iraq War as a war of good vs. evil, in fact, was inextricably tied to the rhetorical linkage of Iraq with terrorism. On the evening of 9/11, writes Scott A. Bonn, the president “reduced the world to a dichotomy,” denouncing the terrorist attacks as evil. The charge was soon expanded to include al Qaeda and bin Laden and employed repeatedly in presidential rhetoric throughout the ensuing weeks and months. From the moment of its inception in the fall of 2001, then, the war on terror was conceived as a battle of absolute opposing forces. Thus as the Iraq War began to take shape discursively, developing as one arm of the war on terror, it simultaneously developed as an arm of the war on evil. The “Hunt for bin Laden” slogan morphed into the “Search for Saddam,” with the image of one dark face transposed onto another as the embodiment of evil. These images were the latest iterations of the “monolithic evil Arab” stereotype perpetuated by U.S. media and pop culture, which, as Debra Merskin explains, “constructed all Muslims as Arab and all Arabs as terrorists.”

In demonizing him, official-media rhetoric thus figured Saddam Hussein—and, in his person, the Iraqi state—as the Other against whom the righteous citizens of America stood united. He was effectively dehumanized, a necessary step in both the achievement of public
support for the war and the physical commission of war on the battlefield. Saddam Hussein’s
dehumanization as the enemy other rendered him, in the eyes of the typical American, much
easier to punish: according to Albert Bandura, “[w]hen dealing with individuals who have been
deprived of their humanness, people seldom condemn punitive conduct, and they create
justifications for it.”85 Those who punish, of course, must simultaneously be divested of their
capacity for self-reflection and guilt, a point Hedges makes particularly well: “A soldier who is
able to see the humanity of the enemy makes a troubled and ineffective killer. To achieve
corporate action, self-awareness and especially self-criticism must be obliterated. We must be
transformed into agents of a divinely inspired will, as defined by the state, just as those we fight
must be transformed into the personification of an unmitigated evil.”86 Saddam Hussein, in the
hands of the Bush administration and the mainstream media, was transformed into this
unmitigated evil, the barbaric enemy of God and, by extension, of the people of the United
States.

Despite its strength, however, the good vs. evil narrative had its limits. According to
conventional wisdom, America had no quarrel with the Iraqi people, and any war against
Saddam Hussein was not also a war against the masses he had so long oppressed. He was evil,
his Ba’athist regime and army were evil, but the same was not to be said of the average Iraqi
man, woman, and child who, for the more than twenty years of his rule, had lived in fear of
torture, rape, disappearances, mass executions, and any number of other human rights
violations.87 President Bush documented these atrocities again and again in public addresses
during 2002 and early 2003, reiterated by Secretary Powell and others, and repeated by the
press.88 Further, if Saddam was stockpiling WMDs, the citizens of Iraq surely had more to fear
than anyone else; he had already proven his willingness to use chemical weapons in his own
country in 1988, when he released mustard gas and sarin on thousands of Iraqi Kurds in the final
days of the Iran-Iraq War. By all accounts, the people of Iraq were Saddam’s first victims, and
not enemies of the United States.

Thus developed a third narrative in pre-war discourse, peripheral to the dominant
accounts of terror and evil, but important nonetheless. This narrative presented war with Iraq as a
war of liberation and operated according to a sort of doublethink embodied in the president’s
assertion that “when we talk about war, we’re really talking about peace,” offering Americans a
means to reconcile the incongruity of dropping bombs on and shooting missiles at a nation
populated by tens of millions of their friends. As cast by Bush and other top officials, “the war in
Iraq would not be a war on Iraq,” says Mike Gasher, “but a dramatic and necessary first step in
freeing both the Iraqi people and Western democracies from the persistent threat posed by
Saddam.” The war was to be, essentially, a “[r]escue scenario,” a humanitarian effort.

Administration rhetoric focused on the need for Iraqi freedom increased in the months leading up
to the invasion, a trend that, according to Bonn, likely resulted from the government’s efforts to
influence members of the public who remained unswayed by the more dominant narratives.

The liberation narrative, of course, relied on the widely held (and seriously misguided)
notion that American forces would be welcomed by the grateful people of Iraq, a refrain one
critic refers to as “the Bush-Cheney administration mantra of the time.” Just three days prior to
the invasion, Vice President Dick Cheney stated on NBC’s Meet the Press, “My belief is we
will, in fact, be greeted as liberators”; several days before that, in a speech to the VFW, Deputy
Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz alleged a parallel with WWII: “Like the people of France
in the 1940s,” he said, Iraqis “view us as their hoped-for liberator.” On the whole the American
public had little difficulty believing that the beleaguered people of Iraq would greet U.S. soldiers
as the bearers of freedom and democracy, rather than fear and revile them as conquerors; in the mind of the average American, democracy stands as the political system par excellence—and Americans exist on the distant side of a long history of colonialism and imperialism.

The emphasis in official discourse on Iraqi liberation seriously intensified only after the end of major combat operations, as the single biggest justification for going to war with Saddam—to thwart terrorism—began to fall apart. Weapons inspector David Kay reported to Congress in October 2003 that his team had not yet located WMDs in Iraq. In June 2004, fifteen months after the invasion, the bipartisan 9/11 commission announced its discovery of “no credible evidence” connecting Iraq and the terrorist attacks of September 11,98 dealing a serious blow to the war-on-terror framing. Then, in January 2005, the Iraq Survey Group, of which Kay had been the head, concluded its search for WMDs;99 the failure of inspectors to uncover a supply of weapons in Iraq more than indicated that Saddam Hussein’s much-touted WMDs did not exist and that the Bush administration had told a “Big Lie” to gain public support for invading Iraq. Indeed if pre-war rhetoric had peddled the conflict as necessary first and foremost because Hussein was an evil supporter of terrorists, at least partially responsible for the atrocities of 9/11, and in possession of (or in the process of acquiring) WMDs that threatened American and global security, the findings (or lack thereof) of the months and years following “Mission Accomplished” revealed that war had been patently unnecessary—and continued to be unnecessary even as American troops and resources were heavily invested in Iraq.

All those architects of war who had fabricated from distorted intelligence a motive for the invasion now needed a new storyline.100 By the beginning of Bush’s second term in office, the administration “retroactively” shifted its primary rationale for war to the liberation frame.101
Commenting on the president’s Second Inaugural Address and State of the Union speech, both delivered in January 2004, Bernstein asserts,

...Bush reiterated the words “freedom,” “liberty,” and “democracy” over and over again—as if they constituted an incantation or a mantra....[O]ne can’t help but draw the conclusion that all this talk about our mission to spread freedom and democracy throughout the world is intended to help us forget that the original justification of the Iraq war was the presumed “imminent threat” of Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction.102

With WMDs gone up like smoke, liberation, according to Kokkeong Wong, was “a convenient after-thought and a public relations strategy to win back popular American support for the war,”103 a feel-good story any democracy-loving American could get behind. The Bush administration was bent on rewriting history to prove that Iraqi freedom had always been the war’s most essential priority.

With little scrutiny and general deference to the administration, the media passed the liberation narrative onto the public. The toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad’s Firdos Square on April 9, 2003 owned the news that day and quickly came to symbolize that “this was, indeed, a war of liberation, the outcome of which—the fall of Hussein—was the single, most fervent desire of the Iraqi people.”104 CNN and FNC ran live footage of the event off and on for hours, editorializing on its exceptionally meaningful nature.105 The following day, NYT columnist William Safire opined on the statue’s fall at some length:

Like newly freed Parisians tossing flowers at allied tanks; like newly freed Germans tearing down the Berlin wall; like newly freed Russians pulling down the statue of the hated secret police chief in Dzerzinsky Square, the newly freed Iraqis toppled the figure of their tyrant and ground their shoes into the face of Saddam Hussein.
All these pictures flow together in the farrago of freedom’s victories over despotism in the past two generations. Just as video [sic] of human suffering understandably triggers demonstrations against any war, unforgettable images of the jubilation of enslaved people tasting liberty drives home the wisdom of just wars.106 In reality, the statue’s felling was, according to Robert Fisk, “the most staged photo-opportunity since Iwo Jima.”107 Carefully framed photographs and television shots offered a vantage point, both visual and narrative, particularly convenient for the American intervention. Iraqis in the square that day needed the help of not only American soldiers, but also an American tank, to bring down the concrete behemoth, and what looked like throngs of thousands of citizens cheering the American invasion and the overthrow of Saddam were actually only hundreds.

One year into the war, PBS anchor Jim Lehrer offered the following explanation for the media’s failure to seriously consider, in advance of the invasion, the possibility of a lengthy American occupation of Iraq: in political discourse, he said, “The word ‘occupation’…was never mentioned in the run-up to the war. It was ‘liberation.’ This was a war of liberation, not a war of occupation. So as a consequence, those of us in journalism never even looked at the issue of occupation.”108 The media, in other words, accepted as reality Washington’s version of the war and passed this version onto the American public. Following Bush’s reelection, the media allowed officials to “redefine” the war; talk of evil dropped out of the news, and journalists “dutifully” reported on Iraq in accordance with the liberation frame.109 On the pages of America’s newspapers, on television screens, and in the hearts and minds of citizens, the nature of war in Iraq had shifted, at least for a time. U.S. forces were no longer pursuing a wicked terrorist hiding deadly weapons in the desert; instead they sought to overthrow a tyrant and his bloody regime, to bring peace to a people long tormented on those same sands.
Tactics for Crafting the “Right” Story

The development of the Iraq War in American public discourse was influenced not only by the nation’s experience of September 11, 2001, the war on terror, and of course the 1991 Gulf War but also by the more historically distant yet culturally resonant war in Vietnam. The legacy of the U.S. media during the Vietnam era had a particularly significant impact on the shaping of the war in Iraq, an impact evident in the military’s implementation of embedded reporting and the official-media emphasis on patriotism. Among policy makers, political scientists, and media critics, the role played by members of the press in Vietnam has been and to this day remains controversial, but conventional wisdom accords to the media, especially television, considerable responsibility for turning U.S. public opinion against the war and for the resulting American military withdrawal/defeat. Although scholars since the 1980s have convincingly shown that the media was “a follower rather than a leader,” to use Daniel Hallin’s phrase, the commonly held perception of the press as tide-turner in Vietnam had a significant influence on official attitudes and policies toward the media in Iraq in 2003.

The claim that the media, and, more specifically, television, “lost the war” in Vietnam by undermining public morale and strengthening antiwar sentiment, however popular, rests primarily on two misconceptions. The first concerns the supposedly adversarial relationship between the media and officialdom during the period (and to this day), or what has become known as the “oppositional media thesis,” which holds that as of the second half of the 1960s the media began to undermine the American people’s faith in political institutions. In the early stages of American intervention in Vietnam, the press overwhelmingly supported the war, offering frequently patriotic reports, and when outlets did present opposing views, the results,
according to Michael J. Arlen, “sounded safe and institutional, and rather like a rerun.”

Negative coverage sharply increased, however, following the “stalemate” of the 1968 Tet Offensive. According to Hallin, this increase did not mark a change in the media’s *modus operandi*: throughout the war they maintained their professional commitment to objectivity, continued to rely extensively on official sources, and presented generally unfavorable coverage of the protest movement. Hallin, who studied hundreds of hours of Vietnam-era footage from the main U.S. news networks, found that, rather than demonstrating antagonism toward the government, the increase in negative war coverage was “a reflection of and a response to consensus—especially of elite consensus—on foreign policy.” Put differently, opposition to the war had shifted from the fringe to the political mainstream, where it was discussed by legislators, members of the administration, and policy makers and considered by average Americans, and thus it had also shifted to the realm of newsworthiness. Only once elite members of the establishment framed the war as an issue of debate and the opinion of the general public began to reflect the concern did the mainstream media begin to cover the war in such a way.

The second misconception concerns the nature of “uncensored” media coverage during Vietnam, which is purported to consist primarily of dead soldiers and bloody battles and to have induced Americans’ war fatigue. Unlike their counterparts in earlier armed conflicts, the media during the war in Vietnam enjoyed extensive access to military action paired with considerable freedom from government control. Detailed accounts of battles filled the pages of the country’s major newspapers, while images of the first “television war” were broadcast nightly into American homes. Writing in 1978, former President Nixon levied a by-then familiar charge against television during Vietnam: through “relentless and literal reporting,” he said, the news channels “[m]ore than ever before…showed the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of war,”
which led to “a serious demoralization of the home front.” In reality, the gore on television was rather muted, for reasons of decorum as much as anything else, and Kendrick Oliver asserts that the media failed “to communicate the most unpalatable aspects of the military campaign.” Prior to Tet, less than one-quarter of news coverage was devoted to combat, and any fighting that was shown often amounted to “a few incoming mortar rounds or a crackle of sniper fire.” The situation was similar with reports on casualties. Of course occasional high profile episodes depicted the stark violence of the war, such as Morley Safer’s 1965 report on the Marine burning of Cam Ne, but Tet was “the first sustained period during which it could be said that the war appeared on television as a really brutal affair,” and by this point public opinion had already begun to turn against U.S. involvement.

Such scholarly revelations, though, had little impact on the views of military decision-makers in the ensuing years. Having learned from the media’s “perceived noncooperation” during Vietnam, as well as the British example in the Falklands in 1982, the U.S. military, claims Heinz Brandenburg, “went on the defensive” with regard to media involvement in armed interventions over the next quarter century. They kept the press out of the loop in Grenada in 1983 and afterwards initiated a pooling system in Panama in 1989, which they used as well during the Gulf War two years later. With this system, a limited number of journalists had access to members of the military and their activities at any one time, and these journalists shared their reports with the larger group of news organizations comprising the pool. Pool reporting was highly regulated by the military and enshrouded in secrecy, and the practice found little favor with journalists. Despite some tweaks and changes, the military utilized the highly unpopular press pool throughout the 1990s and in Afghanistan in 2001, when journalists complained of some of the most stringent regulations imposed during a modern crisis. A major shift occurred
with the 2003 Iraq War, however, when the presumed lessons of Vietnam, paired with the
dissatisfaction wrought by the approach in Afghanistan, led to a different and decidedly more
strategic engagement of the media by the military: the embedding program.

After decades of the military restricting media access and censoring press copy in order
to avoid negative coverage, the implementation of the embedding plan was a form of what
Brandenburg calls “proactive media management.”128 Journalists embedded during the Iraq War
(some 775 at the highest point)129 lived and traveled with military units to which they had been
assigned by the Pentagon and Department of Defense (DoD), reporting from these units for the
duration of their time at the front. Although reporters had traveled with troops in earlier
conflicts,130 the Iraq War marked the first instance of the practice being implemented as part of
official policy and the first time members of the media remained with troops for an extended
period of time. According to Brandenburg, “One cannot emphasize enough how significant a
departure from previous practice in media treatment by U.S. forces the embedding program
was.”131 Retired United States Air Force (USAF) Colonel John Warden, who served as a pundit
with MSNBC and CNN during the Iraq War, illuminates the thinking underlying embedding
when, after noting that he had viewed journalists as “the enemy” while serving in Vietnam, he
explains, “Then I realized that if I don’t talk to them, I don’t have an opportunity to present our
own [the military’s] view.”132 While Warden’s remarks speak to the individual soldier’s desire to
be represented congruously with his own (undoubtedly positive) self-perception, when extended
to the institutional mindset, they gesture toward the military’s primary motivation for instituting
the embedding program: “Our people in the field need to tell our story,” says a Public Affairs
Guidance document on embedding released by the Pentagon.133 In other words, those in the
uppermost echelons wanted journalists to “get it right,” to quote Warden further— to portray the Iraq War according to official, pro-war narratives.

The embedding program did lead to largely positive coverage of the combat phase, the period during which most embeds remained with their units. Embedding, says PBS correspondent Terry Smith, fostered a “great intimacy” between the media and the troops with whom they lived, worked, shared “hardships, dangers, et cetera,” and, given the “simple human reaction to protect those who protect you,” journalists often fell prey to a sort of “Stockholm Syndrome.” Many came to view themselves as part of the unit to which they were attached, rather than as a separate entity whose role was to provide coverage of the war from an outsider’s perspective, and their reports reflected a positive bias. While the frequency of live reporting meant, according to one reporter, that the government’s “ability to control what [journalists] said was exceedingly limited,” many journalists seemed keen to self-censor based on affinity for “their” units. Journalists also understood that, because of the “ground rules” agreement they had signed before embedding, the military could dismiss them without reason or appeal.

The practice of embedding significantly shaped the nature and extent of the media’s, and thus the American public’s, access to information during the initial phase of the Iraq War. Embedded reporting offered television viewers what they had not experienced since Vietnam—a front-row seat at the war—while at the same time denying them (often without their realizing it) what they sorely needed: informed analysis of the words and images coming from the screen. Speaking of the appeal as well as the weaknesses of embedded TV coverage, Smith says,

It was immensely compelling to watch Kerry Sanders [an NBC reporter with the Eighth Marine Regiment] going up with units as they approached a berm and engaged the enemy. And it was almost addictive television to watch because it was close—it was
either real time or close to real time. And yet what did you actually learn from that? You could see some puffs of artillery landing at the target three-quarters of a mile or a mile or two away. And yet what was the strategic significance of that target? That often got lost.

What was the larger significance of the whole move in that direction, down that highway, circling that city? What was the picture?

The intensity, immediacy, and thrill of the war experience, as Smith notes, were heightened for the viewer as a result of the journalist’s embedding in the action, and this made for engaging television. But the entertainment factor notwithstanding, this sort of coverage suffered some serious drawbacks. The very immediacy that gives to an embed’s story its exhilarating, in-the-moment quality simultaneously strips it of relation to other aspects of the war experience; the reported troop movement or air strike exists in the here-and-now but without connection to anything beforehand or afterward and without position in any bigger picture. In this way, embedded reporting is similar to the “play-by-play coverage” of a football game, writes retired USAF Colonel Thomas Gardner: “We only see what is in the frame….We don’t see the larger developments outside the frame that will really shape the future of the conflict and all those affected by it.”

In addition to issues of contextualization and continuity, reports from embeds lacked substantial interpretation and analysis and offered a narrow perspective on the conflict. According to a study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, 94% of embeds’ televised reports were primarily fact-based, which led to news with “a blinding amount of detail that doesn’t tell us what is really going on.” Because journalists were attached to a military unit, they could not of their own accord pursue stories or sources that might paint an alternate—or unflattering—picture of the American intervention; they were limited to the material
immediately before them and the point of view of the American ground soldier. In most cases, the resulting stories were stories of combat, heavily focused on the U.S.’s advanced, high-tech weaponry, although with little mention or sense of this weaponry’s human impact, which was miles away and invisible to the reporter’s (and camera’s) eye.¹⁴⁵ Thus what the American public saw during the opening stage of the fighting was a highly sanitized view of the war: exploding targets in the distance, the inanimate victims of the United States’ superior military might.

For officials, however, these drawbacks were really benefits: the embedding program strengthened the military’s control over the war frame(s). According to Gardiner, the DoD “information warrior” John Rendon declared that the embedding program had “worked as they had found in the test. It was the war version [of] reality television, and for the most part, they [the military] did not lose control of the story” to the press.¹⁴⁶ For their part, the mainstream media was well pleased with embedding, or what Carson and Kaye call “that genius stroke of enforced complicity disguised as access.”¹⁴⁷ Though individual commentators had their criticisms, most cheered the program and its results, finding embedding to be far superior to any arrangement between the U.S. military and media since Vietnam.¹⁴⁸

At its most basic, embedding aroused feelings of patriotism in journalists and their audiences. The program “physically reintegrate[d] the media into ‘the team’ that, from a military point of view, they quit in Vietnam,” asserts Brandenburg.¹⁴⁹ Whether or not embeds behaved like “cheerleaders” for the military intervention,¹⁵⁰ their troop-focused coverage helped to maintain the support of the American public for the war effort—much in the same way pre-1968 coverage did for the Vietnam War.¹⁵¹ Admiral Terry McCreary, one of the key thinkers behind the embedding program, explains in the following way the power of making “‘the face of the troops the face of the war’”: “‘from the uniform perspective, we need the support of the
American people for our troops….While you may or may not agree with the war, you really
support them and them coming back alive.””152 Embeds’ stories about the troops’ missions,
heroism, hardships, and heartbreaks worked to strengthen news audiences’ sense of loyalty to,
sympathy for, and pride in the American forces in Iraq.

Embedded reporting was only one of the ways in which American patriotism was
employed in the discursive construction of the war. The attack on dissent as unpatriotic was
another powerful tactic used by members of the administration, from Secretary Rumsfeld to
Attorney General John Ashcroft to White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer.153 In a
particularly pointed moment, Fleischer, speaking of media criticism of Bush’s “Mission
Accomplished” speech on the USS Abraham Lincoln, said, “It does a disservice to the men and
women of the military to suggest that the president, or the manner in which the president visited
the military would be anything other than the exact appropriate thing to do.”154 Such
commentary positions the president as akin to the Pope—infallible—and for the media to say
otherwise, to challenge the commander-in-chief, is to undermine the troops and their efforts.
Fleischer clearly implies that the media has a flag-waving, not a skeptic’s, role to play with
regard to the war.

Because the Iraq War was constructed as an extension of the war on terror, “the events
affecting the media after September 11 also influenced the media at the start of the war” in
Iraq.155 Prominent among these events the firing of several print journalists who criticized the
president’s behavior, the cancellation of Bill Maher’s television show after he said that
“cowardly” was not an accurate description of the 9/11 bombers but rather of the United States’
use of long-range missiles, and Fleischer’s response to Maher that “[t]his is not a time for
remarks like that, there never is.”156 Such examples reflect the patriotic atmosphere permeating
the nation in the wake of 9/11 and prior to the Iraq invasion and demonstrate why attacks on
dissent so easily proliferated in the mainstream media in the early months and years of the Iraq
War. After the popular music group the Dixie Chicks told a British audience they were
“ashamed” that President Bush was from their home state of Texas, for example, their music was
boycotted by the two largest radio conglomerates in the U.S.; one local station even staged a
“Dixie Chick Destruction Day” and bulldozed a load of the group’s CDs. On television,
MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough maligned dissenters, calling them “leftist stooges for anti-American
causes” whose “views…could hurt American troop morale,” while his colleague Michael Savage
denigrated anti-war activists as “maniacs who are encouraging our enemies, weakening our
troops’ resolve, and confusing the American people.”

Such language established a binary between patriots and dissenters and made support for
the war an essential component in the discursive construction of the “us” against whom “our”
enemies were positioned. This binary is perhaps nowhere as clear as in the warning issued by
O’Reilly several weeks before the invasion: “Once the war against Saddam begins, we expect
every American to support our military, and if they can’t do that, to shut up. Americans…who
actively work against our military once the war is underway will be considered enemies of the
state by me.” Whether the plural we in O’Reilly’s statement refers to the host and his pro-war
brethren at FNC or across the mainstream media more broadly, or whether O’Reilly presumed to
speak for war supporters nationwide is unclear, but, in any case, he places dissenters in the same
category as traitors, double agents, and even terrorists. Such a position is dangerous notion. The
characterizing of dissent as a crime against the state rests on a strongly authoritarian ideology.
Hedges contends that, in times of war, “When any contradiction is raised or there is a sense that
the cause is not just in an absolute sense, the doubts are attacked as apostasy,” and, indeed,
freedom of opinion and speech became the first casualties of the conflict in Iraq, before a shot was ever fired.

The government further appealed to patriotism through sensationalized plays on the narrative of American heroism, which the media advanced with little scrutiny. Most notable among these was the story of Jessica Lynch, the first American prisoner of war to be rescued since Vietnam. A nineteen-year-old Army supply clerk, Private First Class Lynch suffered a series of leg and spinal injuries when her convoy was ambushed during the Battle of Nasiriyah in March 2003; she then spent eight days in an area hospital under the care of an Iraqi medical staff before being returned to the American camp by U.S. Special Forces. Soon afterward, U.S. officials released an edited version of the filmed “rescue” to members of the major media, who quickly broadcast it worldwide, turning Lynch, according to John Kampfner, into “an icon of the war[, a]n all-American heroine.” As James R. Compton asserts, “The patriotic mythology of ‘Saving Private Lynch’ was a made-for-Hollywood script”:

[the video showed Lynch, draped in a U.S. flag, being carried on a stretcher into a helicopter that would fly her to a U.S. military hospital in Germany. Soon family photos of the photogenic private would be released….“She Was Fighting to the Death,” shouted an April 3 headline in the Washington Post. The story went on to quote unnamed Pentagon sources who said Lynch, despite having sustained multiple gunshot wounds at the hands of Iraqi soldiers, had “fought fiercely,” discharging her weapon until she ran out of ammunition….Seemingly overnight, Private Lynch had entered the pantheon of American heroes. Lynch had not actually fired a shot because her gun jammed, and all of the injuries she sustained occurred during the crash, but the military altered or ignored these and other significant details—
such as the fact that Iraqis had tried to return Lynch to the Americans in an ambulance but were fired on and that locals had alerted the Special Forces upon their arrival that Saddam’s army had already fled the hospital—to construct a more compelling and pro-American narrative. When questions arose about the military’s version of events and a less dramatic story emerged, not only did American news outlets report “the more theatric set of circumstances, even though the other version of events had better sourcing,” but media conglomerates also competed intensely for the first interview with Lynch, with CBS offering a TV movie and potential projects with its subsidiaries, MTV and Simon & Schuster.

At a press conference less than two months after the September 11 attacks, President Bush asserted, “You’re either with us or against us in the fight against terror.” Whatever false dichotomies or faulty logic were at work in the president’s declaration, the mainstream media made it abundantly clear that they were “with” the Bush administration and the U.S. military in Iraq, from overt references to “our troops” and American flags flying on screen during news segments, to the more oblique newspaper headlines that cast administration claims as statements of fact and stories that buried the opinions of critics. The so-called lessons of Vietnam were well-learned. In the place of rigorous questioning and challenging of official statements was the echo of Dan Rather’s post-9/11 pronouncement: “George Bush is the president. He makes the decisions, and, you know, it’s just one American, wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where, and he’ll make the call.”

It is into this hyper-patriotic milieu of (self-) imposed silence that recent fiction of the Iraq War enters, attempting to reopen and expand the discursive space surrounding the Iraq War. By upsetting easy binaries, challenging fixed notions of identity, and exposing contradictions, the novels and stories explored in the following chapters critique dominant narratives of the war.
and offer a deeper, more complex understanding of one of the defining events of contemporary American culture and history. In so doing, these texts work to restore to democracy the power of language and help to encourage the critical thinking and engaged debate so desperately needed in U.S. society.

Notes

6 Ibid.
8 Message, Saigon 2622 to State, sub: Steps That Have and Will Be Taken to Improve and Expand Press Relations Effort, FAIM/IR, June 27, 1964.
13 As a testament to its indispensability to democratic society, the watchdog press is sometimes referred to as “the fourth branch of government” or “the fourth estate” (the latter term is more frequently employed in Britain).
14 This need not necessarily be the case in a democratic society. Prior to the twentieth-century, the American press was openly partisan, just as the contemporary British press is considerably more open about political bias in its reporting. See Michael Schudson, Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers (New York: Basic Books, 1978); and Daniel Schiller, Objectivity and the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).
This is not to say that the public blindly accepts each and every frame put forth by those in power. Matthes taught with Rove in 1999 a class entitled “Politics and the Press” at the University of Texas at Austin while Rove worked on then-governor Bush’s presidential campaign. Israel co-taught with Rove in 1999 a class entitled “Politics and the Press” at the University of Texas at Austin while Rove worked on then-governor Bush’s presidential campaign. Israel’s A Nation Seized: How Karl Rove and the Political Right Stole Reality, Beginning with the News (Spokane, Washington: Marquette Books, 2011) provides an account of this experience.

Further, as Robert W. McChesney points out, media members’ liberalism is one “thoroughly committed to capitalism and existing social relations,” not one that seriously challenges the tenets of a free market system.


Chapters 2 and 3 offer a fuller exploration of the attitude/approach toward the media by President Bush and his top officials.

Ctd. in Cunningham, “Re-thinking Objectivity,” July 11, 2003. To be fair, the media’s exaggerated dependence on official sources was to a considerable extent a function of logistics. As Dadge notes, journalists had few connections inside Iraq and were unable to enter the country on their own in order to verify or discredit administration claims. If they wished to present their audiences with any information about Iraq and related issues—which of course they did, given the nature of their business—they were generally forced to rely on the administration intelligence (Why the Media Failed Us, 23).


Frank Esser, “Metacoverage of Mediated Wars,” American Behavioral Scientist 52 no. 5 (January 2009): 711. Esser includes within this framing tacit WMD, the supposed connection between Iraq and Al Qaeda, and the rescue of POW Jessica Lynch.

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This is not to say that the public blindly accepts each and every frame put forth by those in power. Matthes identifies four factors that determine the likelihood of a frame’s acceptance: frame repetition; the absence of competing frames; frame strength or appeal to emotion; and “credibility of news sources, prior attitudes, and interpersonal communication among citizens.” “Framing Politics: An Integrative Approach,” 250.
decade intervention as a last
Administration’s Rhetoric, months preceding the start of the war in Iraq
Enduring Freedom (OEF)
Clinton, “Floor Speech of Senator Hillary Rodham Clin
responsibility in the hands of our President and we say to him
Clinton continued, “A vote
for any new doctrine of pre
in the United Nations more likely, and therefore, war less likely,” she said, noting that she was not casting “a vote
Senate floor of her reasons for voting in favor of the measure: “bipartisan support for this resolution makes success
“Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq Resolution of 2002” intends military in
nine of fifty democratic Senators and eighty
48
Goodman,
antiwar voice on a cable channel that you
an overstatement. Antiwar voices were not popular. And if you’re General Electric, you certainly don’t want an
big business, and war: “They [the top management at MSNBC] were terrified of the antiwar voice. And that is not an
overstatement. Antiwar voices were not popular. And if you’re General Electric, you certainly don’t want an
antiwar voice on a cable channel that you own; Donald Rumsfeld is your biggest customer.” Interview by Amy
phil_donahue_on_his_2003_firing.
46
Much has been made of the bipartisan support for the war the president won in Congress, which included twenty
nine of fifty democratic Senators and eighty-two of 209 Representatives. Despite its name, however, the
“Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq Resolution of 2002” intends military intervention as a last
resort, not an initial step. On the day of the resolution’s passing, prominent democrat Hillary Clinton spoke on the
Senate floor of her reasons for voting in favor of the measure: “bipartisan support for this resolution makes success
in the United Nations more likely, and therefore, war less likely,” she said, noting that she was not casting “a vote
for any new doctrine of pre-emption, or for unilateralism, or for the arrogance of American power or purpose.”
Clinton continued, “A vote for it [the resolution] is not a vote to rush to war; it is a vote that puts awesome
responsibility in the hands of our President and we say to him—use these powers wisely and as a last resort.” Hillary
Clinton, “Floor Speech of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton on S.J. Res. 45, A Resolution to Authorize the Use of
49
The U.S. at this time was also involved in military action in the Philippines, under the name of Operation
Enduring Freedom (OEF)–Philippines. Though sharing a title with OEF–Afghanistan, the effort in the Pacific was considerably less publicized than the Middle Eastern mission. Two additional OEF missions began in Africa in the
months preceding the start of the war in Iraq—OEF–Horn of Africa and OEF–Trans Sahara. All OEF actions were
considered part of the Global War on Terror.
50
51
Ibid., 525.
The term weapon(s) appears eighteen times in the course of Bush’s speech, each time in direct relation to Saddam Hussein and/or Iraq. In five instances the term is immediately preceded by nuclear, in three instances by biological, and in one instance by chemical.


The authors go on to note, “In 4 speeches, a discussion of terrorism preceded the first mention of Iraq, giving the impression that Iraq was a logical extension of the terrorism discussion” (ibid.).


Pillar, Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy, xx.

Ibid.

It is, of course, an interviewer’s responsibility to doggedly pursue tough lines of questioning, especially with subjects of high importance such as the president; in this instance, however, the interviewer’s interest appears to lie in reducing to the most simplistic terms Bush’s moral or philosophical stance toward Saddam Hussein—wit results that provide the public with little to no insight into matters of import.

As George Lakoff notes, “One of the most central metaphors in our foreign policy is that A Nation Is A Person. It is used hundreds of times a day, every time the nation of Iraq is conceptualized in terms of a single person, Saddam Hussein. The war, we are told, is not being waged against the Iraqi people, but only against this one person. Ordinary American citizens are using this metaphor when they say things like, ‘Saddam is a tyrant. He must be stopped.’ What the metaphor hides, of course, is that the 3000 bombs to be dropped in the first two days will not be dropped on that one person. They will kill many thousands of the people hidden by the metaphor, people that according to the metaphor we are not going to war against” (“Metaphor and War, Again,” Alternet.org, March 17, 2003, accessed July 18, 2014, http://www.alternet.org/story/15414/metaphor_and_war_again.


Hedges, War Is a Force, 74.


Saddam and his Ba’athist regime surely did not consider the Kurds to be “their” people, especially as the northern Kurds supported Iran in the Iran-Iraq war of the late 1980s. During Saddam’s trial for genocide in 2006, he made a telling distinction, saying that the Kurds serving as witnesses were “trying to create strife between the people of Iraq. They’re trying to create division between Kurds and Arabs.” “Saddam Defends Killing of Kurds,” Guardian, September 11, 2006, accessed January 26, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/11/iraq1.


Lakoff, “Metaphor and War, Again.”


Bonn, Mass Deception, 63.


What immediately follows in the interview reveals the administration’s ability to stay on message. The interviewer, Tim Russert, poses the following question: “If your analysis is not correct, and we’re not treated as liberators, but as conquerors, and the Iraqis begin to resist, particularly in Baghdad, do you think the American people are prepared for a long, costly, and bloody battle with significant American casualties?” Rather than answering the question, the vice president responds, “Well, I don’t think it’s likely to unfold that way, Tim, because I really do believe that we will be greeted as liberators.” Russert’s questioning continues in a similarly pointed manner and offers a fairly rare example of intense early scrutiny by a member of the TV media of the liberation frame and the administration’s basic case for war. Dick Cheney, interview by Tim Russert, “Interview with Vice President Cheney,” June 17, 2004, accessed August 28, 2014, http://www.alternet.org/story/15414/metaphor_and_war_again.


99 Kay resigned in January 2004; Charles Duelfer took up the post in his stead.

100 In an addendum to the so-called “Phase II” report by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, released in June 2008, Committee Chairman John D. Rockefeller writes that there were “significant instances in which the Administration went beyond what the Intelligence Community knew or believed in making public claims, most notably the false assertion that Iraq and al-Qaida had an operational partnership and joint involvement in carrying out the attacks of September 11th. The president and his advisors undertook a relentless campaign in the aftermath of the attacks to use the war against al-Qaida as justification for overthrowing Saddam Hussein. Representing to the American people that the two had an operational partnership and posed a single, indistinguishable threat was fundamentally misleading and led the Nation to war on false premises” (95). The report also finds that the Bush administration provided information that contradicted available intelligence about Saddam Hussein’s preparation to give WMDs to terrorist groups (86), a 2001 meeting between Mohammed Atta and an Iraqi intelligence officer (76), and the predicted postwar situation in Iraq (92). United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, “Report on whether Public Statements Regarding Iraq by U.S. Government Officials Were Substantiated by Intelligence Information Together with Additional and Minority Views,” 110th United States Congress, June 5, 2008.

101 Bonn, Mass Deception: Moral Panic, 162.
102 Bernstein, The Abuse of Evil, 85.
103 Wong, “Background,” 5.
109 Bonn, Mass Deception, 162.
110 Hallin, “Uncensored War,” 163.
113 Following a trip to Vietnam during Tet, Walter Cronkite closed his now-famous February 27, 1968, broadcast with, “‘For it seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. This summer’s almost certain standoff will either end in real give-and-take negotiations or terrible escalation; and for every means we have to escalate, the enemy can match us, and that applies to invasion of the North, the use of nuclear weapons, or the mere commitment of one hundred, or two hundred, or three hundred thousand more American troops to the battle. And with each escalation, the world comes closer to the brink of cosmic disaster. To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion.” CBS Evening News, in Reporting Vietnam, Part One: American Journalism 1959–1969, ed. Milton J. Bates et al. (New York: Library of America, 1998), 581–82.
121 For all the shock and outrage it caused, the burning of Can Ne (and other early incidents of its kind) likely did little damage to American public support for the war, which was based, for the extent of the conflict, primarily on American interests.
124 See Lewis, Brookes, Mosdell, and Threadgold, *Shoot First and Ask Questions Later*, chapter 1, for an explanation of the British handling of the media during the Falklands crisis.
129 About three thousand journalists covered the war during major combat operations; unilaterals traveled on their own, without the assistance or protection of the U.S. (or British) military.
130 Ernie Pyle, for example, offers a well-known example from WWII.
134 Tugend, “Pundits for Hire.”
138 Rule number 8 of the DoD’s “Release, Indemnification, and Hold Harmless Agreement and Agreement Not to Sue” states, “The media organization and the media employee understand and agree that the Government may terminate the embedding process at any time and for any reason, as the Government determines appropriate in its sole discretion.” Department of Defense, February 23, 2003, http://www.defenselink.mil/NEWS/FEB2003/D20030210EMBED.PDF.
Most, though not all, embedded reporters left their units following the end of major combat operations. Smith, in Clarke et al., “Assessing Media Coverage,” 12. Editor and senior vice president of the American Journalism Review Rem Rieder also commented on the “addictive” nature of embedded coverage, though in a decidedly more cheerleading way: “Television was simply stunning. The combination of technology and access made war a spectator event—you could see it as it happened. It was addictive.” For all this praise, though, even he notes the inability of embedded reporters to contextualize and analyze their material. “In the Zone,” American Journalism Review, May 2003, accessed August 27, 2014, http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=2966.

This was especially true of live, unedited footage, which made up a significant portion of televised reports from embeds. In the first week of the war, sixty percent of embedded reports were live and unedited. Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project Staff, “Embedded Reporters,” Pew Research Journalism Project, April 3, 2003, accessed August 15, 2014, http://www.journalism.org/2003/04/03/embedded-reporters/.


Pew Research Center, “Embedded Reporters.”

Gardner, “War as Mediated Narrative,” 117.


Sam Gardiner, “Truth from These Podia: Summary of a Study of Strategic Influence, Perception Management, Strategic Information Warfare, and Strategic Psychological Operations in Gulf War II,” October 8, 2003. Rendon was the head of the Rendon Group, an information management firm hired by the Pentagon to assist in marketing the 2003 Iraq War to the American public and, before that, by the CIA to engage in anti-Saddam propaganda efforts following the Gulf War. Seymour Hersh, “The Debate Within,” New Yorker March 11, 2002, 34.


Rieder gushed about the program, for example saying, “Now that the fighting has stopped, it’s clear that the great embedding experiment was a home run as far as the news media—and the American people—are concerned” (“In the Zone”). Moreover, when journalists spoke of changes for future conflicts, they spoke of the need to “perfect” the system of embedding, not drastically alter or replace it.

Brandenburg, “Journalists Embedded in Culture,” 229. The embedding of reporters with military units served, to some extent, to allay the tension and hostilities between the two groups. The clash of the military and press corps is a well-documented, if sometimes over-stated, phenomenon. The two cultures differ in significant ways, with the former relying on the cooperation of the whole unit, while the latter is individualistic and competitive in nature. As a result of these differences in professional ethos, it is often difficult for members of one group to understand those of the other.


Lewis, Brookes, Mosdell, and Threadgold, Shoot First and Ask Questions Later, 190.

See Dadge, Why the Media Failed Us, 54–55, for a discussion of administration attacks on dissenters.

Qtd. in Dadge, Why the Media Failed Us, 55.

Dadge, Why the Media Failed Us, 54.

Politically Incorrect, episode 1164, broadcast September 17, 2001 by ABC; “White House Briefing.” After examining the press conference transcript in 2009 in response to Fleischer’s request to “correct the record” regarding his remarks, Washington Post ombudsman Andrew Alexander writes that the comment’s “linkage to Cooksey dilutes the exclusive criticism of Maher. And it’s not obvious that the…comment is a veiled threat intended to restrict speech and expression rather than a plea for sensible conduct.” Republican Louisiana Representative John Cooksey had recently said that anyone wearing a “diaper on his head” should be stopped and searched. “A White House Spokesman’s ‘Urban Myth,’” Washington Post, May 24, 2009, accessed August 21, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/22/AR2009052202902.html.


162 Ibid.


167 *Late Show with David Letterman*, episode 1687, broadcast September 17, 2001 by CBS.
Chapter 2

War Stories, Commodity Patriotism, and Pop Culture Spectacle in Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk

Wars, like everything else, are replaced by the telling of them.
—Roman Skaskiw

A well-thought-out story doesn’t need to resemble real life. Life itself tries with all its might to resemble a well-crafted story.
—Isaac Babel

What is the function of a war story or, more precisely, a war story in contemporary America? This is one of the central questions explored by Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk, Ben Fountain’s 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award-winning Iraq War novel. According to the novel’s Albert Ratner, a world savvy Hollywood producer bent on making a movie about the eponymous hero and his fellow Bravo squad members, a war story is “‘all about feeling good about America again.’” Albert may take the narrow view, but the Oscar-winner is no stranger to audience desires and what is required to sell a twelve-dollar movie ticket. In an age of war-weariness (and underperforming Iraq War films), he understands that the novelty of Bravo’s story may be just what the nation’s moviegoers ordered: “‘My guys are heroes, right? Americans, right? They’re unequivocally on the right side and they also unequivocally kicked ass, now when was the last time that happened for this country?’” (58). Like Albert, Norman “Norm” Oglesby, the (fictional) owner of the Dallas Cowboys NFL team, has strong opinions on and plans for Bravo’s war story. Believing the Bravo tale “‘will go a long way toward reinvigorating our [the American people’s] commitment to the war,’” Norm intends to turn it into a guts and glory blockbuster via his very own production company, Legends, which he plans to launch with the Bravo project (275). Norm’s chosen moniker seems an apt name, for it
represents precisely what his type of company aims to do: turn the Bravo war story into a story for the ages, a legend.

For both men, though in different ways, the contemporary war story serves to bolster American patriotism—en route, of course, to achieving the ultimate capitalistic end of maximum profits. And, despite maintaining an interpretation distinct from one another, neither Albert nor Norm questions the accuracy or legitimacy of his interpretation of the war story at issue, which is the tale of nineteen year-old U.S. Army Specialist William “Billy” Lynn and the other American soldiers who fought at the Al-Ansakar Canal in Iraq. As seen on footage recorded by a fictional embedded Fox News reporter some three weeks before Fountain’s novel occurs, the ten men of Bravo engaged in a brutal firefight with Iraqi insurgents on the banks of the canal, suffering two casualties of their own and killing all of the Iraqis present in just under four minutes’ time. Soon after, images of the battle began “viraling through the culture”—playing again and again on Fox News Channel and popping up on YouTube—turning the Bravos into minor celebrities overnight (4). When the “sort of famous” soldiers arrive home for a two-week Victory Tour orchestrated by the Bush administration to showcase them to an American public desperately in need of some positive PR about the war in Iraq (84), their story (at least one very spectacular version of it) precedes them. This spectacularized version of events is the one that Albert and Norm each intends to market as the story of Al-Ansakar Canal, complete with a Mark Wahlberg or a George Clooney (or maybe even a Hilary Swank) to boost profits.

As a war story itself, the “darkly comic” Billy Lynn is a bit unconventional, chronicling neither the soldier’s life in the field nor the veteran’s experience upon returning home. Instead, Fountain’s novel follows its young protagonist and his remaining squad members on the last day of their Victory Tour, approximately thirty-six hours before they are to return to combat to
complete their tour of duty. Taking place entirely stateside, the bulk of the action occurs at Texas Stadium over the course of the five or six hours preceding, during, and following a Dallas Cowboys football game on Thanksgiving Day sometime early in the Iraq War.7 Billy and the seven other Bravos eat and drink in large quantity while being “lovingly mobbed by everyday Americans eager to show their gratitude” (28), and while Albert attempts to secure a movie deal putatively on their behalf and Norm parades them around like prize hogs before the media and Dallas’s moneyed elites. Looming in the middle distance is Bravo’s participation in the much-discussed but mysterious halftime performance featuring Destiny’s Child; slightly farther out looms the squad’s impending return to Iraq. Through it all, Billy struggles to understand his experience in the war, especially the fight at the canal, the nation to which he has come home, and his place in both.

Amid all the surface glitz and glamour of Hollywood producers, Texas oil barons, and pop princesses, Fountain’s novel offers a meditation on the seedier, more sinister sides of the war, including the meaning, uses, and limits of patriotism; the revitalization of traditional masculinity; and the role of spectacle in creating and maintaining support for the war. One reviewer calls the patriotism displayed by the book’s characters “mindless,”8 while another terms it “junk patriotism.”9 This patriotism manifests in the national zeal of outsized pro football players who volunteer to “‘ride wit’” Bravo for a few weeks in order to help them “‘bust some raghead ass’” but who demur when Billy suggests they join the Army if they would like to contribute to the war effort: “‘We got jobs,’” responds one of the players, and laughing ensues among his teammates (187). In the world of the novel, Fountain constructs the figures of these “huge” and “martial” football players within the framework of the post-9/11 “rehabilitation of heroic masculinity,” which, according to Michael Kimmel, “the media trumpeted” (172, 174).10
Fountain likewise constructs the men of Bravo, who in their purported masculine courageousness play a starring role in what Susan Faludi calls “the post-9/11 reenactment of the fifties Western.” Spectacle and the Iraq War are deeply intertwined at Texas Stadium, from the way in which Norm uses the war as a promotional tool for himself during the press conference to the way in which Bravo squad serves as a patriotic prop during the halftime performance. As Billy and his band of brothers are coddled, pawed, paraded around, and plied with food and drink, patriotism, the American soldier, and heroism are employed again and again as tools in the service of profit, and the novel investigates how the war has been manufactured in a way that is profitable for the producers: in other words, how the war becomes a product of the capitalist regime at work in America.

This chapter investigates the various narrative strategies through which *Billy Lynn* disrupts the easy and highly sellable language of dominant discourses and resists the heroic narratives of war so common in American culture. Through a fragmented, recursive narrative structure and multiple points of view, Fountain interrogates the war hero discourse and challenges the narrative construction of the Iraq War as a war of good vs. evil. These strategies problematize the unitary realism adopted by popular and historical discourses and also create compelling links with the Vietnam War, drawing attention to the ways in which the cultural and historical memory of the earlier conflict impacts the war in Iraq. Furthermore, through narrative fragmentation—rendered in the form of what one reviewer calls “word clouds”—the novel makes manifest the war’s damage on American social discourse and establishes parallels between the popular lexicons of patriotism, big business, and conservative Christianity, revealing the degree to which the nation’s language has been co-opted and the ideas influencing and influenced by the war have proliferated throughout American culture. In addition, the novel
engages with issues of representation and reality, considering the ways in which embedded reporting crafts the reality of the events on which it focuses. Finally, the characterization of NFL team owner Norm Oglesby points to the dangers of patriotism, while the choice of the National Football League stadium setting allows for an exploration of the ways in which spectacle, patriotism, and pop culture join together to shape a war far removed from experiential reality.

Looking from the global back to the national context, Slavoj Žižek, in *Iraq: the Borrowed Kettle*, warns that “[t]he ultimate result of the war will be a change in our political order,” 13 that is, the Western political order. In directing its critique at American popular and corporate cultures and the ways in which these cultures produced and profited from the war in Iraq, *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* opens a space for considering what the war says about and means for the society that willingly undertook its commission and, beyond that, what the war means for the nation’s culture and politics moving forward.

**Memory, Point of View, and Narrative Fragmentation: the Battle at Al-Ansakar Canal**

At the core of the Victory Tour, and ultimately providing the basis for Fountain’s novel, stands the firefight that occurred on the banks of the Al-Ansakar Canal less than three weeks before the start of the novel’s action. Though caught on film by an embedded reporter, the battle scene never makes a straightforward appearance in *Billy Lynn’s* pages, and the novel never provides an authoritative account of its inciting event. Instead, Fountain breaks up the Al-Ansakar narrative and depicts it piecemeal and in non-chronological order over the course of nearly half the novel through a multiplicity of viewpoints and methods, including free indirect discourse, memories/imaginings both realistic and surreal, a magazine article, a speech, and dialogue. While readers might expect the several intense flashbacks provided from Billy’s point
of view, the texts also presents the firefight revealed in fits and spurts, false starts and hedgings, and through a couple of downright odd descriptions, such as when Billy likens the scene to a horrid abortion. The versions of the battle conveyed through the various narrative forms do not always coincide with one another, nor do they add up to a singularly consistent event, opening it up to multiple interpretations and meanings and undermining conventional constructions of the war-historical narrative. Moreover, the various viewpoints lend to the fracturing of traditional notions of masculinity by challenging popular American notions of courage; paired with the novel’s invocation of Tim O’Brien’s *Going after Cacciato*, *Billy Lynn*’s perspective-switching challenges the war hero discourse so prevalent during the Iraq War.

Fountain devotes a substantial number of pages to representing and reflecting on the implications of the firefight, but the battle story that emerges remains plagued by a lack of clarity, riddled with contradictions, and not entirely cohesive. A careful reading of *Billy Lynn* reveals several facts about the engagement, “details that serve as potential elements of a story [and] are value neutral”: the battle took place in late October over the course of two hours, the ten original members of Bravo came to the aid of an American supply unit under fire from Iraqis on the banks of the canal, one American was killed (Sergeant Breem, also known as Shroom) and another severely wounded (Private Lake), and all of the Iraqi fighters present at the scene were killed. These details comprise what Hayden White refers to as a chronicle, the “arrangement of the events to be dealt with in the temporal order of their occurrence.” At this point, the battle remains one step removed from the status of “story,” which, according to White, “requires the further arrangement of the events into the components of a ‘spectacle’ or process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernable beginning, middle, and end.” Indeed, beyond the aforementioned basics, the specific circumstances and details of the Al-Ansakar
engagement remain difficult for the reader to pin down, though not because Fountain forgoes serious consideration of Bravo’s encounter at Al-Ansakar.

Throughout the endeavor to tell what happened at the canal, *Billy Lynn* emphasizes the human impulse to understand and make sense of the lived past by constructing stories, but in the battle’s diverse iterations, the novel rejects the notion of the singular, objective war-historical narrative. Fountain’s novel reveals the constructedness of the narrative of heroism central to dominant American interpretations of the Iraq War such as those forwarded by Norm and members of the media. By refusing to invest the Al-Ansakar story with only one meaning or to adopt the hero narrative as a primary interpretation, Fountain text presents the narrative of Al-Ansakar as would, according to White, “a good professional historian,” drawing the reader’s attention to the construction of history as a “verbal fictio[n], the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.”16 The novel’s multiple, stylized, overtly *literary* representation of the Bravo battle subverts the pre-packaged, highly sellable realism of dominant Iraq War discourse that abounds on television, in movies, in newspapers, and in magazines.

The narrative’s first mention of the battle presages the difficulty that Billy, the conflict’s ostensible star, will have both in understanding and articulating his experience at the canal. Recalling a reporter’s recent inquiry about what Billy was “‘thinking during the battle,’” the third-person narrator muses that “Billy tried. God knows he tried. He never *stops* trying, but it keeps slipping and sliding, corkscrewing away, the *thing* of it, the *it*, the ineffable whatever.” In attempting to make sense of the firefight, Billy seeks a definable set of mental responses to superimpose onto the known happenings of the day, motivations and ideas that will help to
explain his actions; thus far, however, he has been unable to conjure any such thoughts: “‘I’m not sure,’ he answered. ‘Mainly it was just this sort of road rage feeling. Everything was blowing up and they were shooting our guys and I just went for it, I really wasn’t thinking at all’” (3). Billy recalls having a physical and sensory reaction to the scene around him, a gut feeling, but he cannot recall any thought-based response. The latter is important in that it will aid Billy in the narrativization of the events at the canal, helping him to process his experience by shaping it into a story, which, according to Jonathan Gottschall, is for humans what “water is for a fish—all-encompassing and not quite palpable,” 17

Unable to fully develop his own story of the canal, Billy seeks the help of others during the course of the Victory Tour, “traveling this great nation of ours in the good-faith belief that sooner or later he’ll meet someone who can explain his experience, or at least break it down and properly frame the issue.” One such individual is mega-church leader Pastor Rick, to whom Billy “confided in a moment of weakness” (47). Following a rally in Anaheim several days before the squad comes to Dallas, Billy sought the pastor’s counsel about Shroom’s death during the firefight. The flashback to this scene offers some of the novel’s most in-depth and direct discussion of the battle from Billy’s point of view, but shifts in how the novel registers this view reveal the level of difficulty Billy experiences as he attempts to coherently convey his experience at the time of the battle and his present-day apprehension of that experience. Billy’s memories begin with “Shroom lying there wounded. Shroom sitting up. Shroom collapsing in Billy’s lap, then his eyes zeroing in on Billy with such urgency, with so much pressing news, then the fade and his soul releasing, whoom, as if the life force is a highly volatile substance, contents stored under pressure.” Fountain’s text here relies on a fairly straight third-person narrative to relay the intensity of those fraught moments, but as Billy’s situation becomes more difficult for him to
understand and express, the scene continues with a more complex and difficult-to-parse mixture of dialogue, first- and third-person narrations, and the hypothetical second-person:

“When he died, it’s like I wanted to die too.” But this wasn’t quite right. “When he died, I felt like I’d died too.” But that wasn’t it either. “In a way it was like the whole world died.” Even harder was describing his sense that Shroom’s death might have ruined him for anything else, because when he died? when I felt his soul pass through me? I loved him so much right then, I don’t think I can ever have that kind of love for anybody again. So what was the point of getting married, having kids, raising a family if you knew you couldn’t give them your very best love? (218)

Billy twice revises his statement about his response during the moment of Shroom’s death, which points to his difficulty in articulating the moment’s significance in a concrete way. The shift to “you” in the paragraph’s last sentence—the hypothetical, general “you,” as opposed to the second-person point of view directed at a specific individual—seems to implicate the reader in the experience, to draw him or her into the process of feeling and making sense of what Billy has gone through. On the whole, the various points of view underscore the insufficiency of relying on a single perspective for relating the complex, traumatic experiences of even one person, let alone those of an entire squad, military, or nation. Something as complicated, and as fraught, as the firefight at Al-Ansakar must be approached and grappled with from a multiplicity of viewpoints if one hopes to gain any kind of meaningful purchase on the event.

Since the engagement with the insurgents, Billy has repeatedly tried to make sense of what happened, both for his own sake and as a way to connect with others. Some of his memories are simple and straightforward, as when “[h]e remembers the whole front of his body being covered in blood and half-wondering if any of it was his, his bloody hands so slick he
finally had to tear open the compression bandage with his teeth.” Then, when Billy “turned back
to Shroom the big bastard was sitting up! Then going right back down, Billy sliding crabwise to
catch him in his lap, and Shroom looked up at him then with his brow furrowed, eyes burning
like he had something crucial to say” (62). Such an example shows Billy remembering his
experience in a fairly uncomplicated way, reliving the experience without judgment or an
appraisal of its meaning.

At others times, however, Billy is at a loss for words, unable to articulate his experience
and unable—or afraid—to say what comes to his mind. Indeed, difficulties often arise when
others ask Billy to verbalize his thoughts and feelings about the battle, to use “narrative’s
capacity to pattern the chaotic ‘stuff’ of raw experience into intelligible and meaningful
shapes.”18 In one instance, a member of the media grills the young Bravo, firing off questions
such as “What was it like? Being shot at, shooting back. Killing people, almost getting killed
yourself. Having friends and comrades die right before your eyes.” Presumably caught off-guard,
“Billy coughed up clots of nonsequential mumblings,” not likely what the “blithering twit-savant
of a TV newpserson” had in mind. Billy is unable to fulfill the other half of the reporter’s script,
to relate events in the format of a well-ordered and media-friendly story. Moreover, as Billy
babbled on, “a second line dialed up in his head and a stranger started talking, whispering the
truer words that Billy couldn’t speak. It was raw. It was some fucked-up shit. It was the blood
and breath of the world’s worst abortion, baby Jesus shat out in squishy little turds” (40). The
“stranger” in Billy’s head remembers the battle in the colorful language of a combat soldier and a
disturbing, not-suitable-for-television figurative expression. This unspoken response fails to
effectively shape Billy’s thoughts and feelings about the events—the “chaotic ‘stuff’”—of Al-
Ansakar into a narrative that others can understand and assimilate.
Billy’s abortion metaphor is not his only bizarre thought about the canal. In the midst of the squad’s pre-game Thanksgiving feast at the Stadium Club, he experiences not so much a memory of the battle site as a surreal apparition of it:

“Lake,” that’s all it takes to get this bleak little movie going, a night shot of, say, the berm road in pale moonlight, crickets cheeping, dogs barking faintly in the distance, the slow suck and gurgle of the nearby canal. So there is the berm road on a quiet night, then a slow tracking shot that peels off the road and gradually keys on something in the high grass. A leg. Two legs. Lake’s. Peaceful. Those crickets, the soft moonlight, the purring canal. As if waking from a long sleep, the legs begin to stir. Tentative at first, they move with a childlike air of sweetly baffled innocence, but eventually they rise, shake themselves off, and set off in search of the rest of Lake.

Where Billy’s memory fails him, his surreal, disconcerting imagination takes over. The peaceful sight of moonlight and the sound of crickets serve as background to the profoundly disturbing image of two disembodied legs that rise to look for their missing body. This scene plays a phantom limb scene in grotesque reverse: instead of the amputee searching for his or her missing body parts, the limbs themselves search for their owner. As though this is too much to imagine in a straightforward way, Billy’s mind renders the situation through the terminology of mediation, spectacle, and cinema. The battle story morphs into a “bleak little movie” complete with a “night shot” of the road and a “slow tracking shot.” Billy even imagines that “It could be a Disney movie about a couple of household pets mistakenly left behind, for they [the legs] are as brave as that, as trusting and loyal” (54). Viewing his imagination as a movie serves to distance Billy from what he sees in his head, to separate him from the surreal and difficult fact of Lake’s
permanent dismemberment and disability and Billy’s own powerlessness to help his brother-in-arms, both at the time of the battle and in the present moment.

One of Billy’s biggest difficulties is making sense of the disjunction between his memory, objective material reality (as shown in the embedded reporter’s video), and dominant interpretations of the video: “The Fox footage shows him firing with one hand and working on Shroom with the other, but he doesn’t remember that. He thinks he must have been cutting Shroom’s ammo rack loose, pulling the release on his IBA [interceptor body armor] to get at his wounds.” As he tries to imagine himself fending off the insurgents while also working to get his sergeant’s vest off, Billy wonders, “Is this what they mean by courage? Simply doing all the things you were trained to do, albeit everything at once and very fast?” (62). Billy does not remember doing the things the Fox footage very clearly shows him to be doing, but his dispute is not with physical accuracy of the video. That is, Billy does not deny that he undertook the actions shown on the video; rather he remains unsure of the veracity and legitimacy of official and popular interpretations of these actions. Billy’s efforts during the battle have again and again been touted as supremely courageous. He not only earned a Silver Star for valor but also was recommended for the Medal of Honor (a distinction, however, that he was ultimately denied because “some desk jockey at the Pentagon shot it down” [199]), and nearly every person with whom he comes into contact calls him brave, a hero, or courageous. But what, exactly, Billy questions, is the meaning of “courage”?

If Billy lacked the intent or conscious decision to behave bravely, can he—should he—rightly be deemed courageous? Does it matter? It does to Billy, whose concern with the matter echoes, but with a twist, Paul Berlin’s preoccupation with the philosophical nature of courage in Tim O’Brien’s Vietnam War novel Going After Cacciato. O’Brien’s 1978 classic explores
courage on two levels, what Milton J. Bates terms “physical courage” and “moral courage.” In one of Cacciato’s three narrative strands, Spec. Four Berlin stands guard throughout the night in an observation tower on the South China Sea considering what it means to behave courageously in a war he thinks may be unjust. Because the purpose and aims of the war are never clear to him, Berlin “didn’t know if the war was right or wrong or somewhere in the murky middle,” which weighs on him. Given that Cacciato has displayed bravery in the war, Berlin believes that his fellow soldier’s desertion is not a response to fear; Berlin therefore reasons that Cacciato’s desertion must be a moral act and, as such, courageous, since Berlin feels that doing what one believes to be right despite the possibility of outside criticism or censure is a valorous act. In another—this one fantastical—strand of O’Brien’s novel, Berlin tests his (previously failed) physical courage by chasing the deserter Cacciato across Asia and Eastern Europe and attempting to capture him in a Paris boarding house. Courage preoccupies Berlin, who thinks continually about leaving the war and deserting, and many of the novel’s war memories—portrayed in a third narrative strand—depict him as cowardly, frightened, and failing to perform under pressure. Unable to summon the will to fight “during the one big battle of the war,” for example, Berlin hides: “he could only lie there, twitching, holding his breath in messy gobs, fingers twitching, legs pulled around his stomach like a shell, but his legs twitching too as the bombers came to bomb the mountains.” In another instance, when Lt. Martin demands that someone retrieve Frenchie Tucker from the tunnel where he has been killed, Berlin “felt the walls tight against him. He was careful not to look at anyone,” lest he be assigned the dreaded duty.

Just as Iraq is not a mirror image of Vietnam, however, Billy’s situation is not an exact replica of Berlin’s. Faced with the fleeing Cacciato on the hill in Laos, Berlin responds with fear,
urinating in his pants and firing off his machine gun at random. Billy, by contrast, has already performed bravely according to the vast majority of standards, risking life and limb to come to the aid of his sergeant. Urging him not to go back to the war, Billy’s sister Kathryn argues, “You’ve got major cred, it’s not like anybody’s going to say it’s because you’re scared.” When Billy responds that he is scared, that all the soldiers are scared, she responds, “You know what I mean, like scared scared. Like coward scared, like if you never went to begin with. But with everything you’ve done nobody’s going to doubt you” (98). For Fountain’s protagonist, then, the question of courage is different than for Berlin because of what he has already done and how he has already handled himself.

Courage for Billy is an issue at once singular and double, an amalgamation of the physical and the moral into one. At Al-Ansakar, Billy “did not seek the heroic deed, no. The deed came for him, and what he dreads like a cancer in his brain is that the deed will seek him out again” (40). Essentially, Billy’s main concern is whether his so-called courage will surface again should he be put to the test once more upon his squad’s return to Iraq. If his actions were not truly courageous—if they were instead a reflex or the aptly timed result of good training—then he has every reason to worry that the next time something akin to the battle at the canal occurs he may face a much grimmer result. Next time, his training may not be matched to the situation or his reflexes may not kick in quickly enough; if Billy cannot count on himself to be truly courageous in the face of mortal danger, the possibility of mortality becomes that much more frightening.

Vietnam echoes throughout Fountain’s novel as Billy, like Berlin, questions not only himself but also what he has been and is being told about the meaning of courage and behaving courageously. Billy fears that “his deed on the banks of the Al-Ansakar was a digression from
the main business of his life,” that rising to the challenge in such a courageous way is at odds with the rest of his previous existence. Like Berlin, Billy wonders whether courage has more to do with being true to oneself than adhering to the standards and expectations of society in spite of oneself. For Billy, however, this does not entail, as for Berlin, commitment to some high-minded ideal; instead, Billy wonders whether “the bravest thing he ever did—bravest plus truest to himself—was the ecstatic destruction of pussy boy’s Saab?” (91). The text here refers to the manner by which Billy came to enlist in the Army the previous spring: three weeks after his sister Kathryn suffered a near-fatal car accident that left her severely injured and in need of more than a dozen surgeries, her fiancé (also known as pussy boy) broke off their engagement, prompting an enraged Billy to destroy the fiancé’s Saab with a crowbar and chase him around with the crowbar before being arrested. Billy then joined the Army—not as the result of post-9/11 patriotic fervor, or some brave, America-loving sense of brotherhood, but because he was given this option as the alternative to jail. Thus, like Paul Berlin, who was drafted into the Army and had the choices of jail, Canada/exile, or Vietnam, Billy’s service is not genuinely voluntary. As becomes more and more apparent as Billy Lynn progresses, options other than continued service do exist, though no one besides Kathryn and the lawyer from the soldiers’ advocacy group in Austin speaks of them.

Unsurprisingly, courage is not in question in the *Time* magazine account of the battle, in which it is an assumed part of the equation. Titled, “‘Showdown at Al-Ansakar Canal,’” the story opens with, “‘The tiny hamlet of Ad-Wariz on the Al-Ansakar Canal is a backwater even by Iraqi standards, a loose collection of mud-wattle huts and subsistence farms. But for two brutal hours on the morning of October 23, this remote village became the epicenter of America’s war on terror’” (125). The title is reminiscent of the U.S. media’s frequently repeated “Showdown
with Saddam,” a slogan that aimed to invest Iraq, through the person of its president, with the stature of a legitimate opponent. Despite communicating nearly no meaningful information about Bravo’s engagement with the insurgents, the story’s lead is full of dramatizing language and visuals. “Mud-wattle huts” and “subsistence farms” conjure a pathetic, bare-bones vision of Iraqi life, while the hamlet’s characterization as “a backwater even by Iraqi standards”—standards presumably primitive when compared with the first-world ease of Time readers—provokes American disgust at the backwards enemy. In a single sentence, the article has figured Iraq as a pitiful, regressive Other standing in marked contrast to the bounty of twenty-first-century America. As the “epicenter” of the terror war, the hamlet inhabits a crucial place, one worthy of the reader’s attention (at least for the duration of a six-page news article), and, of course, the article’s author labels the conflict as not merely the war on terror but America’s war on terror, by way of playing to the magazine reader’s sense of patriotism and triumphalism.

Following the quoted lead, the narrative zooms out to offer a third-person description of the article’s content: “six pages of copy and photos, plus a 3-D schematic with arrows and labels that bears no relation to any battle that Billy can recall.” The reader of Billy Lynn must imagine for him- or herself the exact nature of these six pages, but the content is obviously powerful, given that the article prompts one appreciative citizen to tell Billy, “‘Be proud…you earned this,’” in reference to the young soldier’s Silver Star (40). Instead of featuring one of the Bravos, the Time cover shows a picture of “…Sergeant Daiker from Third Platoon, a dramatically blurred close-up of his clenched and fearsome face”; in the article itself, Colonel Travers is quoted as saying, “‘It seems this particular group of insurgents wished to die…and our men were more than willing to oblige them’” (125). In the span of only two sentences, Fountain’s novel adds to the narrative of Al-Ansakar one voice and two soldiers, neither of whom was present during the
action recorded by the Fox embed and neither of whom the reader ever sees or hears from again. Furthermore, the voice is not only that of a colonel, a man who commands authority and respect by virtue of his professional position, but is also posturing in the masculine, boastful tone so typical of Rambo-like narratives of war.

Employing a stance/tone foreign to Billy himself both in the course of his thoughts and in his various interactions with the public and the media, Sergeant Daiker’s and Colonel Travers’s masculine posturing points toward dominant narratives’ tendency toward what Kimmel calls the “idealization of military masculinity.”27 According to Faludi, in the post-9/11 era, the traumatized American nation “returned to that 1950s Hollywood badlands where conquest and triumph played and replayed in an infinite loop.”28 After decades of women challenging “traditional American masculinity” by asserting their independence and entering the workforce in staggering numbers, men were again applauded for being manly.29 As with the firefighters and police officers on September 11, so, too, the men serving on the front lines in Iraq once again played the role of masculine heroes.

In fact, Billy’s thoughts, which immediately follow reference to the Time article, offer a distinct corrective to Colonel Travers’s statement about the insurgents and Americans as well as the masculine mode in which he makes his comments:

True on both counts, but not until the very end did they offer themselves up, a little kamikaze band of eight or ten bursting from the reeds at a dead sprint, screaming, firing on full automatic, one last rocks-off martyrs’ gallop straight to the gates of the Muslim paradise. All your soldier life you dream of such a moment and every Joe with a weapon got a piece of it, a perfect storm of massing fire and how those beeps blew apart, hair, teeth, eyes, hands, tender melon heads, exploding soup-stews of shattered chests, sights
not to be believed and never forgotten and your mind simply will not leave it alone. Oh my people. Mercy was not a selection, period. Only later did the concept of mercy even occur to Billy, and then only in the context of its absence in that place. (125)

Unlike the majority of mainstream war narratives—especially the Hollywood films to which the Bravo video is repeatedly likened, as will be discussed below—Billy’s third-person description does not relish the violence of the moment, nor does it trend toward vilification in its depiction of the Iraqi men who died.30 Instead, he renders the scene almost with delicacy, which comes through in terms such as “tender melon heads” and “Oh my people.” The latter phrase stands out due to its placement here. In other instances, Billy uses the term to refer to his fellow Americans,31 but at this moment it reads as an avowal of solidarity with or a lament for all of humankind, or at least all who fight—the Muslim martyrs included and perhaps especially. The focus on the Iraqis’ body parts, their “hair, teeth, eyes, hands,” underscores the degree to which the insurgents are, for Billy, a physical presence to be understood and grappled with.

Fountain’s decision here to represent the enemy fighters from Billy’s perspective urges the reader toward what Judith Butler calls “an apprehension of their common human vulnerability.”32 Enemy or no, the insurgents, like the Bravos, are fragile, susceptible to pain and, ultimately, to destruction—they are human. Thus while the Time article dehumanizes Iraq as a nation and vilifies the insurgents through its use of the War on Terror narrative and reliance on rhetorical binaries, the switch to Billy’s viewpoint troubles the insistent us/them dichotomy that positions enemy combatants as alien Others and strips them of their humanity. Further, Billy’s consideration of mercy for the insurgents (albeit after the fact and in relation to its absence) introduces into the Al-Ansakar narrative an alternative that is completely missing from all other sources. Billy is in the process of experiencing what Butler terms “the disorientation of grief,” of
asking “‘Who have I become?’ or, indeed, ‘What is left of me?’ ‘What is it in the Other that I have lost?’” As a result of these emotions, Billy’s version of the firefight offers a marked challenge to the heroic narrative advanced by *Time* and other media sources.

While the *Time* article serves as the most obvious form of cheerleading for the U.S. military intervention in Iraq, Norm’s representation of the Bravo battle several pages later is all the more sinister for its subtlety. His speech, delivered at a Cowboys press conference, is so practiced and measured, so perfectly delivered, it could serve as a trailer for a movie:

“I’m sure…everyone is familiar by now with the Bravos’ exploits, how they were the first to come to the aid of the ambushed supply convoy, they went straight into battle with no backup, no air support, outnumbered against an enemy who’d been preparing this attack for days. They didn’t think twice about the odds stacked against them, they even suspected it was a trap, and yet they went right in without hesitating—” (129)

At first glance, Norm’s speech appears to offer a fairly straightforward representation of the events comprising the Al-Ansakar battle. But, in actuality, the Cowboys owner, to use White’s term, “emplots” the Bravo tale as a romance story. According to White, “The Romance is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero’s transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it….It is a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness.” During the press conference, Norm emphasizes Bravo’s disadvantages in the firefight as a means of highlighting the squad’s eventual triumph. Billy and the others entered the battle vulnerable, without thought for their own safety or proper back-up, and yet they emerged victorious. They thus emerge as quintessential heroes. Given Norm’s press conference performance, it comes as little surprise when, much later in the novel, while talking about the type of movie he plans to produce, the
team owner calls the Bravo tale “‘a story of courage, hope, optimism, love of freedom’” (275)—a romance if ever there were one.

Billy’s representation of the firefight during the same press conference is, in many ways, the antithesis of Norm’s depiction. When asked by a reporter what “‘inspired’” their actions at the canal, Billy’s disavowal of the hero narrative is clearer than ever. He says he cannot “‘remember all that much about it,’” and as he continues on, the words come out in a halting manner: “‘It’s like I saw Shroo—Sergeant Breem, and, ah, just seeing him there, basically at the mercy of the insurgents, I don’t know, it was pretty clear we had to do something.’” Nearly three weeks have passed since the event, a seemingly sufficient amount of time for Billy to create a heroic story if he were so inclined, but he does not do so, instead continuing on with, “We all know what they do to their prisoners, you can go into any street market over there and buy these videos of what they do. So I guess that was on my mind, in the back of my mind, not like I clearly had a conscious thought about it. There wasn’t much time to think about anything, really. I guess my training just kicked in’” (136). Unlike the practice and polish of Norm’s romance tale, Billy’s first-person recounting emerges in the form of an uncertain, hesitant story by someone who has undergone great trauma, is experiencing considerable grief, and approaches the situation without the ulterior motives of a Norm Oglesby, a man bent on boosting the war and his brand in one fell swoop.

Subsequently the text depicts an exchange of dialogue between Billy and the reporters wherein Fountain models the process by which the media shape one version of a story into a different version that is more compatible with their aims:

*You were the first person to reach Sergeant Breem?*

“Yes. Yes, sir.” Billy feels his pulse starting to shred.
What did you do when you got to him?
“Returned fire and rendered aid.”

He was still alive when you got to him?
“He was still alive.”

The insurgents who were dragging him away, where were they?
“Well.” He glances to the side, coughs. “On the ground.”

They were dead?
“That was my impression.”

The medias laugh. Billy hadn’t meant to be funny, but he sort of sees the humor in it.

You shot them?
“Well, I had engaged those targets in route. There were several exchanges of fire. They basically dropped Sergeant Breem so they could engage, and we exchanged fire.”

So you shot them?
A rank nausea is spreading out from his armpits. “I can’t say that for sure. There was a lot of fire coming from a lot of different directions. It was a pretty crazy time.”
Billy pauses, gathers himself; the words take so much effort. “I mean, look, it’s fine with me if I did shoot them—”

He means to say more, but the room erupts in thunderous applause. (136–37)

Fountain’s use of italics for the reporters’ dialogue lends to their speech a kind of representative quality, as though they are not individuals but reporters in general, saying the usual things, the sorts of things reporters always say in these kinds of situations. They seem to be playing the role of reporters—acting out their prescribed part in the scripted narrative of the Iraq War—rather
than responding in a genuine, human way to the real, live human being in front of them. When considered alongside the dialogue of other members of the media who appear in *Billy Lynn*, the words of these journalists are strikingly similar. Even Billy’s perspective, rendered in the typical manner of dialogue (with double quotation marks and standard font), possesses a prescribed feeling: he uses ready-made military language such as “return fire” and “engage targets” to play his role in the unfolding story. However official and unbiased Billy attempts to sound, his answers cannot match the constant volley of questions fired at him by the journalists; it is as though their script has been prepared ahead of time, ready to accommodate whatever Billy says in such a way that his responses can be tailored to the pro-war narrative. Billy’s last answer—at which point he lapses into non-military language, saying “it’s fine with me if I did shoot them”—generates great applause, a response he neither anticipates or desires, but the conversation ends here because the script has wound its way to a satisfying close: by saying that he is “fine” with having shot the men who killed his sergeant, Billy admits, in the minds of the audience, that he is glad he got payback. The interview comes to an end with Billy as the hero who happily got his well-deserved vengeance.

Author and Iraq War vet Roy Scranton asserts that “the truth of war is multiple. There is no one truth, one war, one story, one narrative. Homer’s *The Iliad* gives us Achilles and Hector both. Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* presents a panorama, across decades, with dozens of perspectives. James Jones’s *The Thin Red Line* orchestrates a polyphony of democratic voices.”*36* *Billy Lynn* adds to this lineage of war narratives through its fragmented, non-linear, and competing representation of the Al-Ansakar experience. There is not and can be no definitive truth about what happened to Billy and the others in Iraq, but rather only multiple truths ever in flux and open to revision. Because of their own particular motivations and contexts, the
American people, the media, and elites such as Norm desire and create a war story that plays out as a fight against dangerous terrorists lurking in the desert, thwarted before they could strike against the American mainland; as payback for wrongs committed on American soil in 2001; or as a romantic tale of courage, honor, and devotion to the nation and fellow comrades. Billy, on the other hand, wants to understand, to make sense of his experience, to process it and to know how to move forward from it. His memories of and imaginings about the battle are hardly compatible with the hero narrative. Billy’s story is one of luck, both good and bad, sound training, and commitment to his fellow soldiers. His story is defined as much by its gaps and confusions as by the ways in which its parts come together to form a coherent, logical whole. In the end, the novel’s rendering of the Al-Ansakar narrative is starkly at odds with the objective realism advanced by the media and accepted by the majority of Americans—the story and meaning of the firefight are, for Billy and for the reader, still in-process, still being made.

**Patriotism Meets Big Business Meets Conservative Christianity: Linguistic Dysfunction in Wartime America**

According to James Dawes, “During war, the effect of violence upon language is amplified and clarified: language is censored, encrypted, euphemized; imperatives replace dialogue, and nations communicate their intentions most dramatically through the use of injury rather than symbol…threats and lies are elevated to the status of communicative paradigms.” With the Iraq War, this linguistic violence was in full effect. Lexicographer Kory Stamper, for example, cites the “alphabet soup of RPGs, UAVs, DHS and the ubiquitous (until we couldn’t find them) WMDs” that proliferated in television and print media and even casual conversation throughout the early years of the war. Such acronyms took the place of complex military or governmental designations—RPG as opposed to rocket-propelled grenade or DHS for
Department of Homeland Security—and often served as euphemisms for more graphic concepts.38 Throughout Billy Lynn, the effect of war and violence is evident in the material condition of the language as well as the novel’s word choice. The text frequently uses clichés, war buzzwords, and euphemisms; employs nonstandard text (italics, bold font, all capital letters, decorative fonts, and random capitalization) and phonetic spelling; scatters words across the page; and utilizes punctuation liberally or not at all. In other instances, words are omitted from characters’ speech, whether through ellipses or by rendering the speech as a series of single words or phrases that represent not entirely coherent thoughts. Taken cumulatively, these formal elements manifest the damage the war has wrought on American language and discursive practices. Moreover, the novel simultaneously indicts patriotism, big business, and conservative Christianity for this damage, representing these popular lexicons through similar narrative strategies.

The novel’s modifications to the language manifest the distortions to speech and understanding wrought by a certain form of American patriotism that was prevalent in the post-9/11 era. Notable examples of such modification emerge when Bravo engages with the citizens of Texas who, as Jeff Turrentine says, “can’t help but couch their sincere gratitude to Bravo Squad in the rhetoric of predigested, unearned bellicosity, which the text relays as a run-on stream of patriotic clichés”:39

trrrRr

Eye-rack,

Eaaaaar-rock,

Sod’m

freedoms
The words are literally floating on the page, removed from any immediate textual context or relation, a move that indicates they are so thoroughly embedded in popular discourse, so fully a part of Americans’ everyday lexicon, that they require no connection to anything outside of themselves in order to be understood: they carry with them their very meaning.

But what, precisely, is this meaning? Stripped of any context, words such as terror, freedom, and democracy are little more than buzzwords, simplified and easy language that bears only superficial meaning. The term freedom, for example, is a fairly empty concept unless it connotes freedom from or for something in particular. The “values” alluded to could be any sort of values—honor, charity, kindness, ambition. With regard to the fighting of a war, if one presumes them to be the Christian values so frequently cited in the weeks and months following 9/11 and leading up to the war, they could refer to forgiveness just as easily as to retributive
Indeed, when fans later cite as justification for the Iraq War the defense of “Ire way of life. Ire values. Ire Christian values” (116), it remains unclear whether they mean forgiveness or retribution, or perhaps some combination of both. Terror is another particularly fraught and uncertain term. As Geoffrey Nunberg asserts, “By the 1990s, people were crying terrorism whenever they discerned an attempt at intimidation or disruption. Hackers who concocted computer viruses were cyber terrorists, cult leaders were psychological terrorists.” The result of such “freewheeling” use of the word was the passage of the 2001 PATRIOT Act, which defined terrorism so “broadly…that a ‘terrorist offense’ could include anything from hijacking an airplane to injuring government property, breaking into a government computer for any reason, or hitting the secretary of agriculture with a pie.” Terror, by this accounting, lost its linguistic specificity and particularity, but, as a result of the heightened political situation at the time Billy Lynn takes place, the word maintained prominence in public discourse as well as much of its shock value.

In the context of Bravo’s Victory Tour and the war in Iraq, terms like freedom and terror, and of course the ubiquitous weapons of mass destruction, are loaded with a host of often conflicting meanings imported, most notably, from the nation’s collective response to the attacks of September 11. According to Michel Chossudovsky, buzzwords such as Osama bin Laden and WMDs became “part of the day to day debate, embodied in routine conversations between citizens. Repeated ad nauseam, they penetrate the inner consciousness of people, molding their individual perceptions on current events.” The use of the term WMD by two people does not guarantee the two are talking about the same concept or using it in the same way, however; what is guaranteed is that the term becomes increasingly more loaded with discursive baggage, which
is then carried over into the next rhetorical situation, where the term adds still more confusion and complexity to the discussion.

As they are said over and over again, the words and phrases begin to lose their accepted, agreed-upon forms, morphing into strings of letters and accumulations of noise that are repeated as though solely for the purpose of repetition, rather than for the purpose of making meaning. Spewed forth continually from the mouths of grateful citizens, terms such as the ones listed above weigh increasingly heavier in Billy’s ears and on his conscience, separating out from the common parlance of the surrounding language, existing in the white space—a sort of void—of language. Indeed, the use of phonetic spelling gestures toward the way in which Billy, hearing these terms from the nation’s public for the tenth or twentieth (or one hundredth) time in the past two weeks, has begun to process the words more as a collection of sounds—*Iraq* becomes “Eye-rack” or “Eaaaar-rock”—than as ordinary forms of social discourse. More broadly, the linguistic breakdown represents a wider breakdown of language across the novel. Rendered phonetically and in isolation from one another, words become simply words and nothing more. They morph into distinct utterances, similar in form and structure to the first sounds and modelings of an infant; no longer do they constitute the small units that join together to form sentences, which contribute to paragraphs and so on, en route to the creation of more significant meaning in the form of grammatically complex linguistic structures. Social discourse, that is, has lost its ability to mean.

The public’s praise of Bravo, as rendered above and in similarly structured sections of the novel, comes across in so clichéd and excessive a manner as to become meaningless; it holds no value for Billy, who questions whether the Cowboys fans even know what they are talking about. Such patriotic excess, frequently seen in the wake of September 11 and during the course of both
the Iraq War and the war in Afghanistan, has distorted both the meaning and value of patriotism in America, raising the question of whether genuine patriotic expression exists as a possibility and, if so, what this sort of expression looks like.

Fountain’s novel also employs a modified version of this “word cloud” technique to represent the discourse of business and finance. In the midst of a meet-and-greet with Dallas’s moneyed elite, Billy asks Mr. Jones, a Cowboys executive, “‘[H]ow [do] you do it? I mean, business. All this. How do you make it happen?’” After humoring Billy in a “patient, teaching-a-retard voice,” Mr. Jones cites “‘Debt ratio.’” and then elaborates (119):

\[
\text{equity/return on equity} \\
\text{income stream/revolving credit} \\
\text{fixed Assets > borrowing against} \\
\text{marketing} \\
\text{branding} \\
\text{goodwill} \\
\text{Balance sheet} \\
\text{depreciation} \\
\text{%s over time…}
\]

PLAYER’S UNION!!!!!

SALARY CAP

sinking

fund

debentures (120)
Forgoing the use of phonetic spelling so prevalent in the novel’s presentation of patriotic clichés, this passage communicates the notion of finance as an esoteric arena of knowledge not to be colloquialized by the linguistic mannerisms of everyday Americans. Here, the text opts for exclamation points, words rendered in all capitals, decorative font, italics, and atypical marks of punctuation such as double slash marks and the greater-than symbol, embellishments that draw attention to this section as a distinctly discursive construction while at the same time creating a gaudy, almost artificial effect, like linguistic bling.

While the novel’s football fans mindlessly blurt out the overly familiar terror and sacrifice, Mr. Jones carries on about fixed assets, depreciation, and debentures, concepts that are entirely foreign to Billy and most likely outside the average reader’s everyday lexicon as well. Given the young soldier’s inability to understand these financial terms—“he knows he’s barely or not even hanging on” in this “actual adult business conversation” (119)—the novel here directs its critique at the corporate side of capitalism and, specifically, at what Samir Amin calls the “tunnel vision of reality focused narrowly on management goals.” The above quoted language does not belong to goods producers and consumers, everyday people like Billy, his sergeant, and the football fans who surround them but, rather, to corporate owners and information managers—those who control the means of production, people like Mr. Jones and Norm Oglesby. The use of scattered, disconnected financial terms points toward a breakdown of meaning and the failure of coherence within the corporate architecture that structures Western society: for all of the overwhelming power of the capitalist enterprise in the United States, Mr. Jones’s mighty terms fail to signify in any meaningful way. The passage’s lack of a logical structure testifies not only to the terms’ representational insufficiency but also to their inability to create something greater, something more significant than their individual selves. However
naturalized these concepts may have become as part of the contemporary American capitalist economy for people such as Mr. Jones (indeed, they roll right off the executive’s tongue), the novel nonetheless reveals them to be constructs, encouraging readers to approach them from a critical, engaged stance.

Use of the same overarching narrative structure to represent the discourses of patriotism-run-amok and corporate capitalism connects the subjects and allows Fountain to implicate both with regard to the Iraq War. Where the former fanned the flames of nativist sentiment and a self-righteous desire for vengeance against those who harmed the U.S. on 9/11 and all others (entire nations included) who even remotely resembled them on a physical, cultural, or religious level, corporate capitalism drove the engines of oil greed and the race for military contracts. More broadly, corporate capitalism fed the consumption-heavy American way of life, which relished the products of war, such as twenty-four-hour news, combat movies, and violent video games. It is surely no coincidence that the corporate owners and business elites rubbing elbows with Bravo during the meet-and-greet in Norm’s private suite are some of the strongest supporters of the war. As Mr. Jones tells Billy, “‘You won’t find many dissenters in this group. They’re strong for the war, strong for America. And not at all shy about speaking their minds’” (116–17). Narrative breaks down, reducing both discourses to individual words and phrases, hindering the seamless flow of information from point A to point B, a flow that typically encourages readers to absorb information without truly processing or considering its meaning and implications. The war, in these instances of discursive dysfunction, reveals itself to be the product of sloganeering, excess greed, and corruption. Individuals in positions of power have used patriotism as a means of branding their products, and their tunnel-vision version of corporate capitalism bears considerable responsibility for the war.
Fountain’s novel also utilizes this fragmented narrative structure to indict conservative Christianity. Following the press conference, Billy meets the sweet and lovely Faison, the Cowboys cheerleader with whom he has been making eyes during Norm’s lengthy speech. Within several minutes, Faison goes into full-on testifying mode:

God

God-ly

Him

and

the light within

Jews

the Jews

Jerusalem

from the Jordan

to the sea

healing and annealing

goodness and light

died for us

his disobedient and gainsaying

people

died

died for us
She sounds not unlike a preacher in a Deep South tent revival, sermonizing to the wayward, calling to their lost souls (not to mention their pocketbooks). The italicizing of “disobedient” and “gainsaying” provides emphasis at particularly emotional parts, when the reader can imagine her voice rising in shock or falling in admonition. At any point she might be expected to swoon, and she does, in a way—moments later, she has an orgasm in Billy’s arms after a brief make-out session, though the text does not make explicit any connection between the sexual and religious aspects of the scene.

Because of her ample beauty and sweetness, Billy gives Faison the benefit of the doubt, thinking, “For all he knows, every word she says is true.” Regardless of Billy’s lust/lovestruck state, however, Fountain injects a vein of skepticism into the scene. Billy draws a term from his own “repertoire of Christian buzz words” when he tells Faison he is “‘searching’” in answer to the question of whether he is a Christian. While his “confusion is genuine,” at the very least he possesses the self-consciousness to understand that he is playing a language game in an attempt to connect with this spectacularly pretty Dallas Cowboys cheerleader (150). The novel makes a connection of its own when it mixes the language of religion with that of patriotism in another similarly structured speech from Faison. Telling Billy “how much his words at the press conference meant to her,” she says,

witness

bearing
Faison’s religious talk of bearing witness lays the groundwork for an emotional speech about sacrifice and freedom, those wonderful gifts the men of Bravo have offered by way of protecting “ire” way of life—the Christian way of life—which is proffered as a righteous justification for the Iraq War. Here, the two discourses—the nationalist and the evangelical—combine and reinforce one another, blending seamlessly into a single, unified discourse.

While the narrative strategy discussed above stands as the novel’s most conspicuous digression from conventional narrative practice, linguistic oddities surface elsewhere in the novel, their distinctiveness made more noticeable as a result of their repetition. Nonstandard spellings, phonetic and otherwise, and missing words are common elements that draw the reader’s attention to the novel’s language as language. Rather than rendering speech in the
standard double quotation marks and as complete thoughts, Fountain frequently represents the
words of minor characters as italicized fragments, the contents of which are repeated from
caracter to character throughout the novel. While Bravo eats Thanksgiving dinner at the
Stadium Club for instance, they are greeted by a group of wealthy gentlemen in their sixties who
go around the table shaking the soldiers’ hands: “So proud, the men say….So grateful, so
honored. Guardians. Freedoms. Fanatics. TerrRr” (56). In a flashback to several days
beforehand, Billy’s mother’s boss expresses a similar sentiment, saying, “Heroes….Iraq.
Freedoms. Gaining freedoms to make our own freedoms more secure” (88). Even the outspoken
Norm has dialogue in this generic mode. Just before finishing a speech in the Cowboys locker
room with “So let’s give them [the Bravos] our warmest Cowboys welcome,” Norm’s speech is
rendered as “Real American heroes…freedoms…that we might enjoy…” (173). The use of
italics in place of standard quotation marks has the effect of de-individualizing the speech and
the character to whom it is attributed. Moreover, the repetition of words such as “freedom” and
“hero” from one character to the next makes the characters’ dialogue interchangeable, stripping it
of nuance and diluting meaning. The novel’s characters string together words and phrases rather
than forming complete thoughts, as though they are using words pulled from an arsenal of
convenient buzzwords and clichés, concepts that require no thought and at the same time
produce very little by way of meaning. At the end of each of these conversations, Billy and the
other Bravos, as well as the reader, feel bereft—or, as with Billy’s sister Kathryn, incensed by
the meaninglessness and hypocrisy.

Billy’s experience of meeting Norm at the press conference offers a final example of the
text’s linguistic challenge to the type of American patriotic expression that proliferated during
the early post-9/11 years. Norm greets his fellow Texan with much enthusiasm: “Pride, he says,
but like a tape played too slow the word warps and fattens in Billy’s ear, ppprrrrRRIIIiddde.
Then courage, coooOUURRraaage. Service, ssseerrRRRrvviccee. SssaccceRRRRiiiffice.
HooooONNnnorr. DeeterrRRRminaaaAAtion” (111). Going beyond representing the
idiosyncrasies of Norm’s southern accent, *Billy Lynn* distorts the team owner’s words so
drastically as to render them bizarre, even ridiculous. While courage, honor, and determination
are virtues by nearly everyone’s standards (though of course people define the concepts
differently), coming from Norm’s mouth these notions are turned into an absurdity; they sound
entirely wrong. Norm here functions much like television news commentators and pundits on the
twenty-four hour news channels in the weeks leading up to and during the beginning of the
war—ceaselessly hammering the patriotic war drum, playing to high moral and ethical concepts
with little substance to back up their claims.

**The Reality of Embedded Reporting: Just Like a Movie, Only More So**

Official-media accounts of war operate—or strive to—much like omniscient and
omnipresent narratives, all-encompassing stories that speak for all points of view, or at least all
that are deemed worthy of register. The president, the four-star general, the cable news host,
each lends his or her voice to the polyphony that sounds as a unified narrator working to
construct the official story of a war. In the case of the 2003 conflict in Iraq, embedded reporters
joined this chorus. Their contributions, however, were not merely verbal, but also, and in many
cases even primarily, visual, as graphic and gripping video footage and still photographs
frequently accompanied reports from the field. In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*,
Judith Butler asserts that the Bush administration made “a concerted effort…to regulate the
visual field” in Iraq, including both the “mandating of what can be seen—a concern with
regulating content” and “control over the perspective according to which the action and
destruction of war could be seen at all.” While overt censorship efforts directed at content, such
as the ban on showing coffins draped in American flags, were significantly more limited than
during previous armed conflicts, the use of embedded reporters allowed the Bush government to
achieve compliance with its war program by subtly yet persistently maintaining control over the
public’s means of viewing the war.

Given the professional separation of the media from the military, embedded journalists
were generally presumed by the American people to offer a neutral, detached view of the war in
Iraq, to present the uninflected truth of the circumstances, individuals, and groups on which they
reported. Their journalistic perspective was, by and large, taken for granted as a perspective.
According to M.F. Casper and Jeffrey T. Child, “If traditional television news formats lulls [sic]
audiences into passivity, then embedded television news reports may provide a sense of exigency
that moves them out of passivity. Since the format is less familiar, viewers may feel they are
witnessing an event first-hand, in a seemingly unmediated manner.” As such, the point of view
of the embedded reporter, along with that of his or her camera, easily came to represent the
reality of the situation in Iraq. This was a great boon for the Bush administration and the
Pentagon given that “individuals who judge the television they watch as more realistic are more
likely to be influenced by that content.” Moreover, embedded reporters typically presented a
favorable view of the U.S. mission; identified on a personal level with the troops; and limited
negative, and potentially inflammatory, coverage of the military’s involvement in Iraq. The
American viewing public, as a result of repeated consumption of embedded reports, acquired a
very narrow and largely positive, home-team view of their nation’s engagement in the war in
Iraq.
In Fountain’s novel the Fox embed’s video has not only dictated the reality of Bravo’s battle but has also made Bravo itself the reality it is: “One nation, two weeks, eight American heroes, though technically there is no such thing as Bravo squad. They are Bravo Company, second platoon, first squad, said squad being comprised of teams alpha and bravo, but the Fox embed christened them Bravo squad and thus they were presented to the world” (4). The now-famous “Bravo squad,” in other words, exists as such because the embedded journalist brought it into being in this manner. In much the same way, the squad exists in the American consciousness and the *Victory Tour* exists as a promotional concept because the embed and his crew caught the firefight on camera and initiated the process of the fight’s dissemination within American culture. Without the presence and photographic intervention of the journalist and his camera, the people of the United States would have no specific knowledge of or concern for Billy Lynn, his comrades, or their engagement with the insurgents in Iraq. The journalist’s footage made Bravo a reality and at the same time determined the very nature of that reality.

Indeed, issues of representation and reality are deeply implicated in the footage of the battle at Al-Ansakar, as revealed through the dialogue of numerous enthralled citizens at Texas Stadium. According to one young woman, when she watched the video on the news, she “had to keep telling [her]self *this is real*, these are *real* American soldiers fighting for our freedom, this is *not* a movie’” (44). Here, the contrast between real and fake is figured as the contrast between life as lived by everyday people, caught on camera by happenstance or in the course of normal goings-on, and lacking narrative context and a version of life scripted, given narrative shape, performed by actors, purposefully filmed, and disseminated for profit. But, however much Billy and the others were everyday people going about their everyday lives in Iraq, their actions at the canal were not caught on film by genuine happenstance. Although the occurrence at Al-
Ansakar was not scripted *per se*, it was certainly anticipated in an overarching sense: the Fox embed’s video, that is, was the product of a well-planned, highly sophisticated, and well-funded system comprising the U.S. military, the U.S. government, and the mainstream media that existed precisely for the recording, disseminating, and pro-administration spinning of Iraq War information.55 While the Bravo video differed from the typical embed video, which generally showed “few images of human targets, human victims, or human consequences” and excluded enemy soldiers,56 it nonetheless served the administration’s purpose by “creat[ing] sympathy for the U.S. led forces” and offering a “compelling” story, as is evident from the Cowboys fans’ enthusiastic response to the men of Bravo and their tale.58 The so-called lessons of Vietnam were well-learned, as the U.S. administration and leading military strategists worked to ensure that the media would aid rather than undermine the war effort in contrast to what they had supposedly done some four decades prior.59 Moreover, while the battle itself, as an isolated instance caught on film, lacked narrative context, the moment it ran on Fox News Channel, it was undoubtedly labeled with a printed headline, placed above a running banner, and accompanied by voiceover from the anchor—elements that effectively positioned it within the narrative frames of heroic sacrifice and the American fight against terror, narrative frames that were then taken up and propagated by government PR specialists and the American people.

The Bravo battle also recalled for some viewers the way in which the spectacular violence of the September 11, 2001 attacks created the uncanny feeling in many worldwide observers that they were witnessing a scene they had previously viewed in a film: muses one Cowboys fan, “‘It was just like nina leven all over again. I sat down and cut on the news and got the weirdest feeling I was watching a movie on cable’” (289). Specific comparisons within the novel include the action film *Rambo: First Blood* (1982) and the apocalyptic science fiction film...
Independence Day (1996). With their scenes of violence and vengeance and mass havoc wreaked in Washington, D.C. and New York City, these movies seem to presage a plane diving into a skyscraper, as on 9/11, or a shootout in the desert that ends with the bloody martyrdom of a dozen or so Iraqis, as at the Al-Ansakar Canal. The similarity to blockbuster films goes beyond a likeness in content. Even though the Bravo video was not bankrolled by a Hollywood production company, it serves a capitalist commercial end similar to that of films such as The Bridge on the River Kwai or Black Hawk Down or Rambo. The video presumably boosted the fictional Fox’s ratings and thereby generated future ad revenue for the network, and, by making celebrities of the soldiers, the embedded video, by extension, profits Norm whose Cowboys brand benefits from the presence of the Bravos at the football game. Furthermore, if Albert can put together his George Clooney- or Hilary Swank-led blockbuster based on the Bravo story, he and all manner of Hollywood bigwigs stand to make an enormous amount of money from what began as a four-minute video filmed by an embedded journalist.

Despite similarities with film, embedded reporting like the Bravo video is generally considered by scholars to be more analogous to reality television programs and “contemporary simulated reality shows such as 24.” William Merrin points to likenesses in style and technique such as “live feeds, editing, narrativization, camera shots…and the Survivor-style reports of the embedded journalists,” and Michael Todd notes the tendency of embedded reporting and other early Iraq War news coverage to use reality TV-like episodic framing of stories. Consisting of “three minutes and forty-three seconds of high-intensity warfare as seen through a stumbling you-are-there point of view, the battle sounds backgrounded by a slur of heavy breathing and the bleeped expletives of the daring camera crew” (288), the Fox footage offers immediate and seemingly unmediated access to the battle action. Contemporary viewers have come to associate
such characteristics with reality TV, making embedded war reports such as the Bravo footage seem “real yet unreal much like an episode of [viewers’] favorite reality show.”

Indeed, near the novel’s close, Billy considers this very issue—the real yet unreal quality of the embed’s video—after the greedy Norm fails to co-opt the soldiers’ story and Albert promises he will work his hardest to secure a film deal even as the men are about to return overseas. Musing about the pointlessness of making a movie “when the original is floating out there for all to see” (288), Billy thinks,

It’s so real it looks fake—too showy, too hyped up and cinematic, a B-movie’s defiant or defensive flirtation with the referential limits of kitsch. Would a more polished product serve better, one wonders—throw in some story arc, a good dose of character development, artful lighting, and multiple camera angles, plus a soundtrack to tee up the emotive cues. Nothing looks so real as a fake, apparently, though ever since seeing the footage for himself Billy has puzzled over the fact that it doesn’t look like any battle he was ever in. Therefore you have the real that looks fake twice over, the real that looks so real it looks fake and the real that looks nothing like the real and thus fake, so maybe you do need all of Hollywood’s craft and guile to bring it back to the real. (288–89)

In such a figuring, there can be no absolute distinction between reality and unreality; they are two sides of the same coin, challenging, undercutting, and reinforcing one another.

Somewhat paradoxically, the continual replaying of the Bravo video on television has only served to render the firefight more real to the viewing public, to cement it more fully in the American imagination as a singular, true event that took place at a singular moment in time and to render it less like a movie which, as a result of its recorded occurrence, can be watched again and again. The wife of a man named Bob enthusiastically tells Billy and the others, “It was just
like Nina Leven, I couldn’t stop watching those planes crash into the towers, I just couldn’t, Bob had to drag me away….Same with yall, when Fox News started showing that video I just sat right down and didn’t move for hours’’ (44). According to Butler, “If the photograph not only depicts, but also builds on and augments the event—if the photograph can be said to reiterate and continue the event—then it does not strictly speaking postdate the event, but becomes crucial to its production, its legibility, its illegibility, and its very status as reality.”

The repeated showing of the Bravo footage on Fox News and its coterminous availability on YouTube have effectively reinforced and solidified the reality of the fight at the canal—and not merely the actions of the American soldiers and the Iraqi insurgents seen on the film, but also the narrating of the embedded journalist and the editorializing of the Fox anchors that undoubtedly came part and parcel with the footage. The (presumably) pro-war, pro-American editorial dialogue becomes an extension and element of the recorded battle, part of its reality as perceived by the masses of Americans who have viewed and re-viewed the battle: these discursive elements, in other words, have become integral parts of the scene itself.

Discussing the exhibition of Abu Ghraib photographs curated by Brian Wallis that was displayed in 2004 at the International Center for Photography in New York, Butler writes that the photographer, though not photographed, remains part of the scene that is published, so exposing his or her clear complicity. In this sense, the exhibition of the photographs with caption and commentary on the history of their publication and reception becomes a way of exposing and countering the closed circuit of triumphalist and sadistic exchange that formed the original scene of the photograph itself. The scene now becomes the object, and we are not so much directed by the frame as directed toward it with a renewed critical capacity. (emphasis added)
Like Wallis’s show, Fountain’s novel serves as an exhibition of the Fox embed’s footage (as do countless heroic embed videos circulating throughout American culture), complete with caption and commentary. The firefight is no longer merely the original scene of ten American soldiers coming to the rescue of other beleaguered Americans in a bloody battle against Iraqi insurgents; it has now also become an object. Over the course of the novel, the reader witnesses a variety of scenes featuring the video’s reception: grateful citizens gush their thanks, verbally replaying their experience of watching the footage on television; Norm propagates the hero narrative during his press conference as he references his own experience of seeing the video; and the Al-Ansakar story is taken up, interpreted, and reiterated by Albert and then by Norm as a form of capitalist enterprise, en route to trying to make a movie.

*Billy Lynn* differs from the Wallis/Abu Ghraib situation, however, in the nature of the triumphalism under challenge. The triumphalism lamented by Butler is visible in the Abu Ghraib photographs themselves but was immediately decried by the majority of Americans; with the Bravo footage, by contrast, the triumphalism comes not from the content of the video, but, rather, from its reception by the Fox anchors, government spokespeople and PR managers, capitalist elites (like Norm and Albert), and of course the American people. Fountain’s novel makes this reception an integral part of the battle itself, incorporating it as part of the object to be considered. By repeatedly directing the reader’s attention to this triumphalist reception, *Billy Lynn* levels an indictment at the self-sustaining and self-perpetuating narratives that initiated and prolonged the war in Iraq, particularly the War on Terror narrative. For example, after explaining that her husband had to drag her away from the television, Bob’s wife declares to Billy, “‘I was just so proud, just so…proud…it was like, thank God, justice is finally being done’” (44). Her words reveal the Iraq War as a righting of wrongs, with videos such as that of Bravo reinforcing
this narrative by showing American soldiers pitted against a sneaky, underhanded enemy yet prevailing against unfavorable odds and great adversity.

Other Cowboys fans up the ante by making the triumph not merely the soldiers’ but also their own. Bob’s daughter-in-law joins in with, “Oh God I was just so happy that day, I was relieved more than anything, like we were finally paying them back for nina leven,” while a twenty-something watching the game with his wife tells the soldiers, “It felt damn good to see us finally getting some payback” (44, 289). Like embedded reporters, these civilians incorporate themselves into the group; “we” are the ones getting payback, not the men of Bravo or even the United States Army but an inclusive first-person pronoun that suggests, as Casper and Child point out, that embedded reporting has reduced the gap between the news viewer and the events being viewed. The triumph of the battle does not belong merely to the soldiers or to the military but to “us,” to all Americans—or at least those red-blooded patriots who support the war with unquestioning hearts and minds.

When a neighbor of Billy’s parents relays her animated experience of seeing the Fox footage broadcast live on television—“Edwin! I yelled, come quick! Billy Lynn’s on TV and he’s taking out a whole mess of al-Qaeda!” (86)—the irony, of course, is dramatic. The reader in 2012 (or later) knows what the Texan patriot in 2004 did not know or perhaps refused to acknowledge: that Billy Lynn was not taking out a whole mess of al Qaeda, because al Qaeda was not yet in Iraq at this early date and Iraq had no connection to the terrorist attacks of September 11. For the slew of patriots who fawn all over the Bravos at the Cowboys game on Thanksgiving Day in 2004, however, al Qaeda in Iraq is as much a reality as the wintry weather at Texas Stadium; it is as much a reality as the narrative told by the Fox footage, reinforced by
the network anchors, and perpetuated by the continual circulation of the Bravo video throughout American culture.

**Spectacle, Patriotism, and Pop Culture at Texas Stadium**

As lauded as Billy and his comrades have become, their celebrity pales in comparison to the high-rollers and high-profile stars making appearances at the Thanksgiving Day football game. Destiny’s Child quite literally takes center stage (at the halftime show), while Cowboys owner Norm Oglesby enters the action one third of the way though the novel and reappears again and again. “[A] Machiavellian big dog with friends in very high places,” Norm shines in all his plastic-surgeried glory, making speeches and pronouncements, calling attention to himself and his football team. Drawing striking parallels between the slick-talking Norm and President Bush, *Billy Lynn* demonstrates how spectacle paired with misguided patriotism—what George Kateb calls “self-worship”—reinforces dominant narratives of war. Moreover, the Texas Stadium setting allows for consideration of the ways in which the conflict in Iraq has been constructed within the American imagination: comparisons of the war with a game/sport illustrate the population’s reductive thinking, while Bravo squad serves as a patriotic prop for capitalistic gain. Finally, the sexualized spectacle of the halftime show divorces war from any experiential reality.

Norm epitomizes the quintessential self-construction, his face a “famously nipped, tucked, tweaked, jacked, exfoliated mug that for years has been a staple of state and local news” (112). He “shimmers with high-wattage celebrity, and therein lies the problem, the brain struggles to match the media version to the actual man who looks taller than the preformed mental image, or maybe broader, older, pinker, younger, the two versions miscongrue in some crucial sense which makes it all a little unreal” (110). When the media cameras are on him,
“Norm’s personal videographer stands off to the side, filming Norm being filmed” (167), creating a double layer of mediation; when the professional media are not nipping at his heels, personal “photographers and video cams follow Norm’s every move” (110), ensuring that no word or deed goes unrecorded. Everything about the Cowboys owner, from the way he looks to the words he speaks and how he speaks them, contributes to the creation of Norm’s media image and, ultimately, to the spectacle that is Norm Oglesby.

Norm’s characterization as a politician—and, specifically, his similarities with President George W. Bush—plays a central role in the construction of his character. Like any successful politician, Norm plays to the crowd with great skill. During a meet-and-greet between Bravo and the team owner, for example, when Sykes gushes that he has been a Cowboys fan for his entire life and is honored to meet Norm, the glad-handing Norm responds, “Well, it’s my honor to meet you, Specialist Sykes….I’ve been a huge fan of the United States Army for my entire life!” to much applause (109). With the skill of a practiced politician, Norm homes in on exactly what will make the crowd love him. In fact, as Billy witnesses Norm’s press conference performance, the young Bravo wonders whether Norm will pursue political office at some point given that Norm is “as polished a public speaker as any of the politicians that Bravo has encountered over the past two weeks. He has the presence, the werds, plus he’s mastered the wounded, vaguely petulant tone that is the style of political speech these days” (131). Indeed, as Adam Langer claims, “The most powerful figure” in the world of Fountain’s novel “is not President George W. Bush, whom one Bravo sergeant likens to a relatively amiable Chase Bank loan officer, or Vice President Dick Cheney, who seems oblivious to the fact that the Bravos regard him as a buffoon, but Norm Oglesby, commander in chief of perhaps the world’s most-pampered and best paid fighting force: the Dallas Cowboys.”74
While Bush may not be a dominant force in the novel, Norm’s character exhibits strong parallels with the president during the press conference scene, and these parallels are crucial to the development of Norm’s version of the Iraq War. At one point during his speech, Norm addresses “‘all those who argue this war is a mistake,’” claiming that “‘we’ve removed from power one of history’s most belligerent tyrants’” (130). In what follows, Norm seems to have taken a page from the president’s playbook: the content and language of Norm’s speech echo both Bush’s remarks to the U.N. General Assembly on September 12, 2002, and his “Mission Accomplished” speech aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003. The former served as the rhetorical launching point for the nation’s move toward invading Iraq, while the latter marked the end of major combat operations. In Norm’s reference to Saddam Hussein as “‘A man who cold-bloodedly murdered thousands of his own people’” (130), one hears Bush’s U.N. speech allusions to the Iraqi regime’s “repression of its own people, including the systematic repression of minorities” and how this “regime once ordered the killing of every person between the ages of 15 and 70 in certain Kurdish villages in northern Iraq.” Norm’s reference to the man “‘Who built palaces for his personal pleasure while schools decayed and his country’s health care system collapsed’” recalls Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” assertion that “We are helping to rebuild Iraq where the dictator built palaces for himself instead of hospitals and schools.” When Norm refers to Hussein as the man “‘Who maintained one of the world’s most expensive armies while he allowed his nation’s infrastructure to crumble’” (130), one hears the U.N. speech’s references to Hussein’s undermining of U.N. sanctions in order “to buy missile technology and military materials” and how he “blames the suffering of Iraq’s people on the United Nations, even as he uses his oil wealth…to buy arms for his country.”
Norm also invokes the War on Terror and “good vs. evil” narratives that President Bush inaugurated vis-à-vis Iraq in his September 12, 2002 address to the U.N. and 2002 State of the Union address, respectively. The Cowboys owner says “that the war on terror may be as pure a fight between good and evil as we’re likely to see in our lifetime. Some even say it is a challenge put forth by God as a test of our national mettle. Are we worthy of our freedoms? Do we have the resolve to defend our values, our way of life?” (130). Just prior to this statement, Norm has been discussing the Bravo footage, and he shifts seamlessly into this line about the War on Terror without specifically mentioning the Iraq War. He clearly takes it for granted that the war in Iraq is part of the War on Terror already in progress in Afghanistan. Such an unspoken assertion strengthens the discursive links between Iraq and the fight against terror, cementing the Iraq War as part of the War on Terror because, by not even raising the issue of whether Iraq and terror are related and, instead, presuming they are, Norm eliminates any opportunity for the audience to question the linkage. In addition, Norm, like the president, displays a binaristic mentality with regard to the war and draws God into the discussion of Iraq, positing the U.S. as a distinctly religious (no doubt Christian) nation. “Our” freedoms and way of life are aligned with “good” and with God, and the opposition—Iraq—is therefore aligned with evil.

Moreover, distinct echoes of Bush’s American exceptionalism resound in Norm’s speech. Trevor B. McCrisken defines American exceptionalism as “a belief that the United States is unique among nations and that it has a particular destiny to improve the human condition,” and Gregory Britton cites a belief “that the American people have an exceptional commitment to liberty and democracy.” President Bush expressed these views again and again during the course of his presidency and used them as support for the Iraq War. Norm’s belief in American exceptionalism is evident when he returns his attention to “all those who oppose the war,”
asking, “‘would the world be a better place today with Saddam Hussein in power? Because what is America for, if not to fight this kind of tyranny, to promote freedom and democracy and give the peoples of the world a chance to determine their own fate? This has always been America’s mission, and it’s what makes us the greatest nation on earth’” (130–31). Norm’s speech is here reminiscent of Bush’s Second Inaugural Address, in which the president asserts that it “is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world” and that “America will not impose our own style of government on the unwilling. Our goal instead is to help others find their own voice, attain their own freedom, and make their own way.”

Norm, like Bush, tells a very particular story about the Iraq War, one in which the U.S. acts as a selfless beacon of hope for all who suffer. The historical legacy of the Vietnam War is especially pertinent here. Applying Loren Baritz’s ideas about Vietnam to Iraq, McCrisken asserts that the Bush administration’s “solipsism convinced them that the U.S. would be welcomed with opened arms by the Iraqi population who would be grateful that Saddam Hussein’s regime was no more.”

The situation, in reality—as was the case in Vietnam—was far more complex and far less favorable to the U.S., although official narratives worked hard to hide this fact.

The Cowboys’ owner displays a type of patriotism that George Kateb labels “[t]he worst degree of egotism”:

the most intense self-worship must commonly be indirect. People tend to be somewhat ashamed of worshipping themselves directly and overtly. The most effective indirectness is to identify with a group, and while doing so, manage to forget that one is absorbing it into oneself, so that one may more palatably worship oneself. One enlarges oneself by
this process of alienation through identification because a group is not merely something external to oneself but rather something that one already imagines as one’s own. One’s group identity and affiliation, certainly in the form of patriotism, is thus what permits the fullest egotism. 

By promoting and elevating the U.S. as he does, Norm, by extension, promotes and elevates himself. He is not even particularly shy about including himself in the group—he uses the personal plural pronoun *us* when he claims that America’s “mission” is what makes “us the greatest nation on earth.” This sort of self-promotion falls easily in line with Norm’s blatant assertions of U.S. superiority, such as when he calls the men of Bravo “‘the best our nation has to offer’” and then claims that “‘our best is absolutely the best in the world, as they proved on the battlefields in Iraq’” (129). In another instance Norm mentions the president who “‘assured’” him that “‘we are winning this war. We are winning, make no mistake. We have the best troops in the world, the best equipment, the best technology, the best home-front support, and as long as we maintain our resolve, it’s only a matter of time before we prevail’” (131).

Norm not only tells a triumphant story of the Iraq War, but he also creates a triumphant, positive spectacle of himself, one not unlike that orchestrated by the Bush administration atop the *USS Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003, when the president announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq. “In this carefully orchestrated media event,” writes Douglas Kellner, “Bush emerged in full *Top Gun* regalia from a jet plane with ‘Navy One’ and ‘George W. Bush, Commander-in-Chief’ logos. Strutting out of the aircraft helmet in hand, Bush crossed the flight deck accompanied by a cheering crowd and with full TV coverage that had been anticipating the big event for hours.” For Norm, the Cowboys cheerleaders and Bravo squad serve as embellishments, and the performance, which takes place in front of forty to fifty journalists and a
number of cameras, will be broadcast to a national audience. The cheerleaders bursting into a U-S-A chant, Bravo answering the media’s questions, and Norm speaking passionately about 9/11 all contribute to the teams owner’s positive media spectacle.

Like the man who makes it run, Texas Stadium, the primary setting of *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, takes on a somewhat larger-than-life presence, situating Billy and the others in the midst of a fabled American tradition, the Thanksgiving Day NFL football game. The hulking structure first comes into view near the novel’s outset, “rising from the sweep of suburban prairie like an engorged and wart-spattered three-quarter moon” (9). Beyond allowing for pyrotechnic linguistic displays, Fountain’s choice of setting has important implications for the novel’s engagements with spectacle and patriotism. A National Football League game that takes place on a quintessentially American holiday in the middle of the politically conservative stronghold of Dallas, Texas, provides the novel with a prime opportunity for considering the Iraq War in the contexts of “rapacious capitalism” and “pop-culture apotheoses” such as the Destiny’s Child-led “halftime extravaganza” in which Bravo participates. The military-themed halftime show as well as the projection of Bravo squad on the stadium Jumbotron both invite consideration of the use of spectacle and the commodification of patriotism within the context of the Iraq War.

The football setting allows Fountain’s text to explore the degree to which, in the American consciousness and discursive context, the Iraq War became, according to Ed Taylor, “a game, something framed in the reductive ethos of sports.” One fan “asks if we are winning, and Billy says we’re working hard” (40), and later “someone asks are we winning,” which “opens the floor for discussion about the war” and for Billy to get “passed along like everybody’s favorite bong” (202). Given that the Bravo movie deal has yet to go through, Norm questions whether those in Hollywood really want the U.S. “to win this war” because, as he sees
it, if they did, they would be eager to share a tale as heroic as Bravo’s with the nation (166). In moments such as these, average citizens as well as the high-rolling Norm demonstrate their conception of the war as an either-or, a competition, something to be won or lost. The sort of patriotism here on display resembles what George Kateb describes as “more like cheering or rooting for a team than…like being a member of a team and having team spirit. Patriotism is a kind of vicariousness, a living outside oneself and through something else that one partly imposes on oneself, while pretending that one has no choice but to lend or give oneself to it.”

No one thinks to ask about how the “game” is going, how the soldiers are faring, etc.; they concern themselves only with the outcome.

One moment in which the novel uses patriotism to liken the war to a game occurs in the display of Bravo squad on the stadium’s Jumbotron. This scene begins with Cowboys fans sitting near the Bravos alerting the men to their onscreen presence, at which point the soldiers “assume postures of masculine nonchalance.” Soon “the screen cuts to a flags-waving, bombs-bursting cartoon graphic against a background of starry outer space.” What starts out as the men taking on a clichéd stance of masculinity, a stance they no doubt assume is expected of them, is replaced by a clichéd (not to mention martial) image of patriotism. Next, “enormous white letters suddenly zoom to the fore,” replacing the cartoon graphic (36):

**AMERICA’S TEAM PROUDLY HONORS AMERICAN HEROES**

which disappears, clearing the way for a second wave

**THE DALLAS COWBOYS**

**WELCOME HEROES OF AL-ANSAKAR CANAL!!!!!!! [sic]**

**STAFF SGT. DAVID DIME**

**STAFF SGT. KELLUM HOLLIDAY**
Here the men of Bravo are turned literally into a gigantic spectacle, first through the projection of their images on screen and then through the projection of their names along with the rallying, patriotic terms “proudly,” “honors,” and “heroes.” For the more than sixty-five thousand fans present at the stadium, the men of Bravo become similar to the football players who will soon be broadcast across the enormous screen: the men are part of a larger-than-life game. Indeed, the Jumbotron spectacle draws “a slow-motion standing ovation” from the fans in Bravo’s section (37), much in the way that athletes garner applause for a particularly excellent pass or tackle, the sort that is then replayed on the Jumbotron.

The soldiers also serve as advertisements for the Cowboys brand. Norm is, of course, always keen on demonstrating his own and his team’s patriotic zeal, and the showing of Bravo on the Jumbotron reveals not only that the brave, beloved soldiers are spending their Thanksgiving Day at Texas Stadium but also that they are being honored by the Cowboys in a very embellished fashion. The spectacle of cartoon flags and bursting bombs sandwiched between images of Bravo and “America’s Team”’s welcome to the squad signals to the audience that the Cowboys are an Iraq War-supporting, America-loving group. Moreover, the form this welcome takes on the page grabs the reader’s attention much in the way an advertisement in a magazine would. Each line is centered and set off from the others by white space, with the bold-
faced, capitalized letters standing out from the surrounding text. It seems no small coincidence that a “hyperactive ad for Chevy trucks” immediately follows the homage to Bravo (37)—in one breath, the capitalist frenzy for profit replaces patriotic fervor. Such a quick transition belies any claim about the purity of motives regarding Bravo’s presence on the giant screen (or at the game in general); the soldiers, just like the trucks, function as a means to a profitable end.

In a chapter entitled “Raped by Angels,” the novel presents the halftime show, a dramatic example of the collision of spectacle, patriotism, and pop culture with the Iraq War. A sort of uber-spectacle, the halftime show consists of countless layers of artifice that are, for all intents and purposes, supposed to be taken seriously by fans and participants alike. Oozing sexuality and provocativeness, rife with noise and movement, intensity and distraction, the show creates sensory overload in the fictional viewers and the readers of Billy Lynn. “The proverbial cast of thousands” involved in the performance includes the Bravos (229), Destiny’s Child, multiple high school marching bands, majorettes, flag girls, drill teams, the Prairie View A&M marching band, on-stage dancers, and a team of twenty Army drill grunts, with each group taking part in a seemingly different action at the same time that the others are involved in another action. Although the “frantic sex-show choreography” of the halftime show appears inappropriate for a major televised event on a national family holiday (229), the fans entirely expect and accept it: “the fans are on their feet and everyone is cheering, everything makes them happy today” (234); while Billy’s mind spins, nobody else who is involved seems to think that anything is out of the ordinary or amiss with this over-the-top performance.

The halftime show’s efforts at invoking patriotism are evident in numerous elements. The Army drill team, “who can make their fixed-bayonet Springfields flip, twirl, spin, do cartwheels about the waist, loop the loop around the shoulder, sail though the air in a daring four-man
diamond toss, and probably moonwalk if so ordered” (228), brings to the performance a stately military air. By their very nature, the drill grunts combine the patriotic with spectacle. The “primary mission” of the U.S. Army Drill Team, as stated on their website, is “showcasing the U.S. Army both nationally and internationally through breathtaking routines with bayonet-tipped 1903 Springfield rifles.”91 Their impressive skills, which have been “thrilling millions of youngsters and proud Americans for more than 50 years” in smaller ceremonies,92 help to bolster the football game crowd’s pride in the military, as the grunts flawlessly do “their thing, snapping their Springfields around in the rock-star version of close order drill” (233). Set alongside the scantily clad super pop icons of Destiny’s Child and a mass of other bodies participating in the show, the drill team comprises one part of “[t]oy soldiers and sexytime all mashed together into one big inspirational stew” (234). Thus the drill team contributes to the creation of a pop culture spectacle that both elicits and builds national pride.

The American flag itself is also invoked as a dramatic part of the patriotic spectacle: “In the stands behind the stage a huge American flag appears, a card stunt, each one of a mass of twenty thousand fans comprising a pixel in this antique special effect” (234). Billy initially has a positive experience of the cards spinning—“now the flag is presented as if rippling in the wind”—and this special effect could certainly be innocent enough. When considered in the context of a halftime show that Billy views as “porn-lite out of its mind on martial dope” (235), however, the use of the flag effect takes on a rather negative air. Giving the spinning cards/flag a second look, Billy thinks that “it’s more like the thing’s been badly pressed, the pattern gashed through with wrinkles and kinks” (234). Rather than seeing something pure and beautiful, he sees something crooked and deformed. The flag does not look quite right: the many thousands of individual pieces fail to create a seamless, coherent whole, to come together cleanly and
smoothly to symbolize the country for which Billy has fought and for which he will soon fight again.

While in other instances the Iraq War is likened to a game, during the halftime show the war becomes a sexualized spectacle made enticing and enthralling by scantily clad bodies gyrating up against high-profile heroes on stage. For their part, Destiny’s Child sings a song that consists primarily of references to sex and to the “soldjah” the singers purport to desire (238). Fountain likely intends this song as a very loose remix of the group’s “Soldier,” which was released in late 2004. Though the actual martial aspects of the song are minimal (not extending beyond repeated references to “soldjah” and “soldjah boy”), the onstage presence of the drill team and especially of the celebrated Bravo squad more than sufficiently implies a connection with the Iraq War. Near the end of the show, the singers begin “serenading” the Bravos who are standing on the lower level of the stage, “slinking and spooning about on dainty cat feet, mewling minor-key trills of do-me angst,” while Billy and the other Bravos on the second level must “stand at attention and get pole-danced [by back-up dancers] in front of forty million people” (239). The halftime show’s minimal connection to the actual war, the flesh-and-blood war in the desert thousands of miles away, remains of little consequence to the enthusiastic crowd gathered at Texas Stadium. The heroic Bravo squad makes the perfect prop for the exhilarating mid-game entertainment, and the crowd is all too happy to buy into this sexy, thrilling version of the Iraq War.

**Conclusion**

While giving the Seventh Annual David L. Janetta Distinguished Lecture in War, Literature, and the Arts at the Air Force Academy in 2013, Fountain asks, “How could a
ridiculously low-tech arsenal of suicide vests, car bombs, and IEDs defeat the most powerful military on earth?” He answers that “we’ve seen this movie before, and not that long ago. That was the movie known as Vietnam.”

Given the film that is to be made based on Bravo’s Al-Ansakar battle, Fountain’s choice of language—*movie*—seems deliberate. This move points toward the artificiality inherent in the construction of war, especially to the element of *production* at work in contemporary war’s creation. Further, Fountain’s linking of Iraq with Vietnam suggests that one cannot consider the discursive construction of the Iraq War without reflecting on the ways in which the more distant conflict has helped to inform and shape the modern-day one.

Žižek rightly warns that “the true target of the ‘war on terror’” may be “not only a geopolitical rearrangement in the Middle East and beyond, but also American society itself (namely, the repression of whatever remains of its emancipatory potential).” Focused so intently on consumption of the war and its array of products—video games, news broadcasts, songs, magazine articles, YouTube videos, even soldiers-in-the-flesh—the nation’s citizens are hardly able to form an original thought or opinion about the conflict. Instead they repeat clichés *ad nauseam* and wait to be wowed by the next Hollywood blockbuster. The high rollers of Fountain’s novel would be all too happy to present them with that blockbuster, were it not for the pesky details that keep getting in the way, details like fame (who is going to play the lead?) and fortune (just how much money does each Bravo deserve for his story?), and, in the case of Norm, an ego the size of a National Football League stadium. These details draw attention away from Bravo’s war story, making it difficult for the much talked-about movie deal to become a reality. In a similar fashion, Žižek cautions against the fighting of “false battles” about “the cost of the war” and the evilness of Saddam Hussein, things that draw attention away from “what actually
transpires in our societies, on what kind of society is emerging here and now as a result of the ‘war on terror.’”

Billy Lynn heeds this call, directing its attention with razor-sharp focus on an American society that is embroiled in the buying and selling of nearly everything—the Iraq War as much as anything else. The resulting war story is far from a tidy, straightforward tale that boosts readers’ pride in America and reinforces their certainty in the virtue of the war in Iraq. Instead, the story the novel offers asks difficult questions, proffers multiple answers, resists closure, and, in the end, indicates that a multi-million dollar movie might not be the grand solution to every problem.

Notes

3 The novel also won the 2012 Los Angeles Times Book Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the 2012 National Book Award.
5 Fountain has invented events—the recording and circulation of the video, the Victory Tour, the Thanksgiving Day activities at Texas Stadium—that resemble historical events and have their genesis in a historical event, the 2003 Iraq War.

“more abstract and more palatable (not to mention easier to say) term than something like “nuclear bombs, biological
everything else, courage interpenetrates the whole fabric of a life.”

“Like everything else, courage interpenetrates the whole fabric of a life.”


Bates, “Tim O’Brien’s Myth of Courage,” 272. To be sure, Berlin waffles between the notions that Cacciato deserted on account of ignorance and on account of moral rectitude; the latter option, however, suggests agency on the part of Cacciato, and this agency is what so interests Berlin.

O’Brien, Going After Cacciato, 177.

Ibid., 90.

In fact he wins the Silver Star, the third-highest U.S. military decoration for combat valor and a medal Paul Berlin fantasizes about.


Kimmel, Misframing Men, 7.


Kimmel, Misframing Men, x.

Though Billy does not vilify the enemy, he nonetheless employs dichotomous thinking when using a phrase such as “the gates of the Muslim paradise,” which is borne from a binary of Christianity/U.S. vs. Islam/Iraq.

See Fountain, Billy Lynn, 23, 47, 212, and 298. Fountain may be making a reference to Micah 6:3: “My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me” (NIV).


Ibid.

It may indeed be Norm’s imagined trailer for his proposed version of the Bravo movie.

White, Metahistory, 8–9.


Kory Stamper, “WMDs, IEDs, DHS: How the Iraq War Transformed the English Language,” Guardian, March 22, 2013, accessed December 2, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/22/iraq-war-gives-english-new-words. WMDs, for example, is a simplified version of “weapons of mass destruction,” itself already a more abstract and more palatable (not to mention easier to say) term than something like “nuclear bombs, biological toxins, and chemical agents.” Tellingly, weapons of mass destruction (and WMD along with it) was selected in early

39 The Old Testament offers several examples outlining the concept of retributive justice, among them when God tells Moses, “‘But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.’” Exod. 21: 23–25 NIV. In the New Testament, however, Jesus’ teaching stands in stark contrast: “‘You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.” But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.’” Matt. 5: 38–42. Moreover, Jesus advances the notion of forgiveness, as when he tells Peter that he must forgive those who sin against him “‘not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’” Matt. 18: 22.
40 Geoffrey Nunberg, Going Nuclear: Language, Politics, and Culture in Confrontational Times (New York, Perseus Books Group, 2004), 53 and 53–4. Nunberg is referring to the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001), signed into law on October 26, just forty-five days after the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks.
41 Michael Chossudovsky, America’s “War on Terrorism” 2nd ed. (Pincourt, Quebec: Global Research, 2005), 158. There is, of course, also the satirical aspect of Fountain’s novel, but surely he is up to more than satirizing Texans. Walker, “The Hero’s Return,” 30. Though narrative breaks down in this (and similar) moment, I employ the term narrative technique broadly to refer to any formal strategy employed in the telling of a story.
43 This by no means suggests that Billy Lynn does not level a broader critique against consumer capitalism—it does, and I briefly consider that critique below; an in-depth discussion of this topic, however, is beyond the scope of this chapter.
44 Omnipotence refers to a condition of knowledge with regard to a given set of circumstances, omnipresence to an ability with regard to physical location. Gerald Prince distinguishes between the two types of narrators, noting, “Omnipresent narrators are typical of historiography and are not necessarily omniscient. Conversely, omniscient narrators are not necessarily omnipresent: the narrator of Mrs. Dalloway is, at times, omniscient but not omnipresent.” Dictionary of Narratology (Lincoln, Nebraska: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1987), 67.
45 Judith Butler, Frames of War (New York: Verso, 2010), 64 and 65.
47 See chapter 1, pp. 52–57, for a discussion of the role of embedded reporting in constructing public support for the war.
50 See chapter 1 for a more developed discussion of embedded reporting.
51 As much as one is willing to consider the American intervention in Iraq “everyday life.”

Lewis, Brookes, Mosdell, and Threadgold write that, “if Iraqi civilians were enigmatic, the Iraqi soldiers were almost invisible—rarely seen or discussed, but generally assumed to be supportive of Saddam Hussein.” Shoot First and Ask Questions Later: Media Coverage of the 2003 Iraq War (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 191.

Ibid., 190–91 and 191.

For a detailed discussion of the misconceptions underlying the notion that the U.S. media were responsible for the United States losing the Vietnam War, see chapter 1.


Ibid. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism study on embedded reporting, however, the war as seen through embedded footage was “less like reality television than reality itself—confusing, incomplete, sometimes numbing, sometimes intense, and not given to simple storylines.” This study, which looks at embedded coverage from three of the first six days of the Iraq War, finds that “[l]ive reports in particular often lacked the things that make reality television such a draw—time and editors.” Embedded Reporters: What Are Americans Getting?, Pew Research Center, April 3, 2003, accessed August 1, 2015, http://www.journalism.org/2003/04/03/embedded-reporters/.


Ibid.

Lewis, Brookes, Mosdell, and Threadgold note, “There is an irony here, of course, in which the verisimilitude of frontline reporting appears to create a sense of unreality. It explains, nonetheless, the findings of the Independent Television Commission survey in which a majority (52 percent) said that this kind of reporting can make war seem too much like fiction, and too easy to forget people are dying.” Shoot First, 191.

Butler, Frames of War, 83.

For Wallis’s introduction to his show, which is entitled “Inconvenient Evidence: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib,” see http://museum.icp.org/museum/exhibitions/abu_ghraib/introduction.html.

Butler, Frames of War, 96.


Additional evidence of the triumphal urge emerges in one of the names attributed to the Bravo footage on YouTube, “America’s throbbing cock of justice” (288), which suggests a domineering and sadistic form of retribution and also calls to mind the sexual humiliation that appears in the Abu Ghraib photographs.


See chapter 1 for an analysis of the U.N. speech with regard to its war-on-terror rhetoric and its central importance in the U.S.’s drive toward the invasion of Iraq.


Bush, “Speech to the U.N. General Assembly.”


Kateb, Patriotism and Other Mistakes, 16.

Douglas Kellner, “Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the ‘War on Terror,’” Presidential Studies Quarterly 27 no. 4 (2007), 637. In an oblique reference to this incident, Faludi writes, “What we had was a chest beater in a borrowed flight suit, instructing us to max out our credit cards for the cause.” The Terror Dream, 3.


Ibid.

Kateb, Patriotism and Other Mistakes, 17.

It is certainly a jab at capitalist marketing and not an error of editing that the second reference to “heros” is misspelled.

The general sexuality of the performance and the involvement of pop culture icons Destiny’s Child recall the incident from Superbowl XXXVIII in which Justin Timberlake exposed Janet Jackson’s breast (which was covered by a nipple shield) during the halftime show. More specifically that incident is called to mind when “Beyonce slinks one hand down the inside of her thigh, then drags it toward her snatch, not quite cupping herself at the critical point; this is the PG-rated crotch grab, suitable for family viewing” (233).


Ibid.

In the chapter entitled “XXL,” Billy imagines the well-appointed and -cared-for players being sent off to war: “Send them just as they are this moment, well rested, suited up, psyched for brutal combat, send the entire NFL!” (184).


Some of the cadets to which Fountain was speaking had been assigned his novel to read for class and would therefore have been familiar with the content of Billy Lynn. Ibid., 1.

Žižek, Iraq: the Borrowed Kettle, 19.

Ibid.
CHAPTER 3
CONSTRUCTING A WAR FIT FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION
IN DAVID ABRAMS’S FOBBIT

We tell ourselves stories in order to live.
—Joan Didion

The priority of the institutional definitions of situations must be consistently maintained over individual temptations at redefinition.
—Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann

While “war is hell” in Iraq as elsewhere, the public affairs team of David Abrams’s 2012 Iraq War novel Fobbit is tasked with spraying a cooling mist over every death, dismemberment, and roadside bomb before releasing news of such events to the American public. The war is hell adage serves as an apt example of the way in which language gets manipulated to dazzling effect: fifteen years after the end of the American Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman said, “‘There is many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory, but, boys, it is all hell,’” yet the phrase “war is hell”—which slides off the tongue and into the ear much more smoothly—has replaced the original in popular culture and literature. In Abrams’s satire of the military press corps during Operation Iraqi Freedom, what gets repeated via official communications nearly always differs quite noticeably from any given incident’s initial rendering, illustrating how fact and truth come in multiple forms and how the official versions of events are always simply one version. Calling the novel “an unsettling expose of how the military tells its truths,” reviewer Benjamin Busch says, “Fobbit traces how ‘the Army story’ is crafted, the dead washed of their blood, words scrutinized and success applied to disasters.”

Much of the work to which Busch refers occurs at the computer of the novel’s protagonist, Chance Gooding, Jr., an Army staff sergeant in the public affairs (PA) office, whose “job was to
turn the bomb attacks, the sniper kills, the sucking chest wounds, and the dismemberments into something palatable—ideally, something patriotic—that the American public could stomach as they browsed the morning newspaper with their toast and eggs.” Indeed, Abrams’s novel, through the lens of Gooding’s daily work, operates as a study in the linguistic and narrative creation of a war fit for newsstands and television news programs, a war fit for a nation that desires to believe that it has made the right choice in sending its soldiers to fight a nebulous enemy half a world away, which, in many cases, means turning an X-rated conflict into something akin to *Bambi* while, at the same time, telling the feel-good story of the year.

*Fobbit* takes place in Iraq in 2005, on and around the fictional Forward Operating Base (FOB) Triumph, which is housed in one of Saddam Hussein’s former palaces. Previously deployed to Iraq as a United States Army journalist, Abrams in his novel takes up the handling of information about the war effort by PA officers, their efforts to render information along lines deemed acceptable by the chain of command, and how the results correspond—or, more typically, fail to correspond—with the versions of events occurring beyond the page or computer screen. The narrative follows and the chapters are named after five soldiers of different rank and responsibility, two of whom, Gooding and Lieutenant Colonel Eustace “Stacie” Harkleroad, are “Fobbits,” which the book’s front cover defines as “…U.S. Army employee[s] stationed at a Forward Operating Base, esp. during Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–2011). Pejorative.” The other three characters, who spend the majority of their working hours beyond the (comparatively) safe confines of the FOB, include the ineffectual and reckless Captain Abe Shrinkle; his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Vic Duret, who, according to one reviewer, “rises to the level of grace under pressure”; and one of Shrinkle’s subordinates, Sergeant Brock Lumley, a capable and decisive individual on whom only two of the novel’s
Shrinkle’s repeated follies and acts of incompetence drive much of the action of the book: Duret struggles to deal with the captain’s messes, while Harkleroad and Gooding strive to write/rewrite the history of his mistakes. Ultimately, Fobbit’s narrative builds toward Shrinkle’s demotion to manager—or “lifestyle coordinator,” in Army terms—of the FOB’s Lifestyle Fitness Center (also known as the gym), his eventual assumption of an alternate identity, and the debacle of the two thousandth American soldier’s death (219).

This chapter explores the novel’s use of satire to highlight the absurdity of the Army’s and the media’s obsession with the two thousandth soldier’s death, which echoes the discourse of the Vietnam War, during which the daily body count preoccupied both the military and the media. The closeness of these echoes belies the supposed singularity of the Vietnam War in American history and points to a disturbing discursive legacy in the nation’s recent wartime practices, a legacy that seems unlikely to end with the Iraq War. Departing from the third-person narration utilized throughout most of the novel, Abrams’s novel also integrates a variety of non-literary materials, such as emails and journal entries, that draw attention to the process of construction of both the literary war narrative and war narratives in general. Fobbit uses these non-literary materials to highlight the U.S. military’s efforts to fashion a more palatable and compelling version of the war in Iraq and thus complicates easy acceptance of official-media narratives—including the Iraq War as a war on terrorism, a war of us vs. them, and a war of liberation—by calling attention to their artificiality and the motives underlying their creation. In exploring the abstract, euphemistic ways in which the Army constructs the concept of death, Abrams’ novel draws close parallels between Iraq and Vietnam and illustrates official efforts to sanitize the destruction of war. Finally, Fobbit’s manipulation of the press release genre points toward the often-hidden subjective nature of official war narratives.
Through its various narrative strategies, *Fobbit* emphasizes how the U.S. military establishment created and sustained self-serving narratives of war: narratives aimed at presenting an appealing picture of the war in Iraq, one beneficial to the U.S. military/producers and satisfactory to the U.S. public/consumers, one in which the fighting (supposedly) comes with a minimal amount of blood and the enemy forces are (again, supposedly) always the worst kind of bad guys. These strategies reveal a reductionist packaging of the war, which turned the conflict into a product to be quickly devoured and easily digested, much like the toast and eggs that Americans eat while reading their morning papers. By drawing back the curtain on the Army’s maneuvering and exposing the machinery of manipulation that worked to shape the American public’s perception of the Iraq War, Abrams’s novel disrupts the military establishment’s ability to maintain control over the narrative of war. *Fobbit* thus encourages renewed and critical engagement with the conflict in Iraq and broadens the topics of discussion to include those who sought to set the terms of discussion.

**Satire and the Two-Thousandth Death: The Vietnam War’s Body Count Repurposed for the Contemporary Era**

*Fobbit*’s similarity—or dissimilarity—to Joseph Heller’s classic World War II satire *Catch-22* (1961) has attracted particular attention from reviewers and critics. In a starred review, *Publishers Weekly* calls the novel “the Iraq War’s answer to *Catch-22*,” while author Jonathan Evison, quoted on *Fobbit*’s back cover, claims that the book “deserves a place alongside *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Catch-22* as one of our great comic novels about the absurdity of war.” Sam Leith, by contrast, asserts, “It’s not an insult to Abrams [to say] that *Fobbit* suffers badly from the comparison it invites” with Heller’s novel; and Busch, referencing Gooding’s reading list inside the pages of *Fobbit*—which includes *Don Quixote* and Dickens’s
*Hard Times* as well as Heller’s work—writes that *Fobbit* is “unlike any of these classic satires because it never really gives itself much fantastical distance from the war. This is a fictionalized transcription of an effort still close enough to find its own humor awkward.”13 Taking a more neutral position, Luckhurst mentions the novel’s “satirical tone,” noting that the book places “the Iraq War into the frameworks provided from earlier wars by the absurdism of Thomas Pynchon or Joseph Heller.”14

Whether or not Abrams’s work rises to the bar set by its predecessor, *Fobbit* includes the two elements that Frye considers “essential to satire”: “wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd” and “an object of attack.”15 The novel ridicules the United States military (and the mainstream media), building toward a focus on its obsession with the impending death of the two-thousandth American soldier in Iraq as well as the Army’s attempts to manipulate the story following the soldier’s demise.16 In addition, the absurd intensity with which the media and military, especially Lieutenant Colonel Harkleroad, approach this occurrence calls to mind the fixation during the Vietnam War era with numerical data, in particular the enemy body count.

Of great interest to the media and the American public, the two-thousandth soldier’s death functions as a sort of watershed event in a war daily becoming increasingly more costly in terms of lives without producing any tangible or strategic gains. According to Gooding’s diary, “members of the Fourth Estate claim it’s a milestone—one to be marked with a top-of-the-fold story,” while for the American people two thousand is “a number most...can hold in their minds and use...to remember the awful waste of this war, this overlong field trip to the desert where we got ourselves tangled in a briar patch and stuck to the tar baby of terrorism” (324). Displaying a grotesque lack of decorum, journalists have for weeks been “begging to be embedded with task
force units that had suffered an unusually high body count. This, the reporters said, would give them a greater chance of being on the scene when number 2000 meets his (or her) fate” (326). Harkleroad even takes a New York Times’s reporter’s request to be embedded with a particularly unlucky unit to his superiors, who shame and humiliate him after first acting as though the plan sounds like a good idea (328–31). The novel pushes the trope of the heartless, story-hungry journalist to its limits, creating reporter characters who, rather than demonstrating basic human decency, care only about getting a front-page story. The irony that inheres in the journalists’ requests is, of course, that the journalists themselves might, too, suffer the unfortunate fate of the individual whose story they are so desperate to cover. While embedded reporters fared better than so-called unilaterals in terms of safety, embeds shared in the difficulties and dangers of the units with which they traveled,17 and the Committee to Protect Journalists reports the death of seven embedded journalists in Iraq between 2003 and 2009.18 Surely the odds of meeting such a fate increase when one is embedded with a unit that has already demonstrated its proclivity toward a high number of deaths.

In focusing with such absurd and intense concentration on the two-thousandth casualty, Fobbit evokes the Vietnam era’s concern with statistics. “In a war where capturing territory was not as important as eliminating enemy troops, the success or failure of an operation was often difficult to determine,” explain James F. Dunnigan and Albert A. Nolfi.19 The U.S. undertook a strategy of attrition in which kill ratio and body count represented a unit’s success or failure during any given action. While conventional models of war would not have suited the situation in Vietnam, the attrition strategy, asserts David L. Anderson, “carried a moral cost because it measured progress in terms of killing rather than in territory or political allegiance.”20 Soon enough, the body count became a highly dubious figure. Phillip B. Davidson notes the
difficulties of getting to some areas where a fight had occurred, meaning that accuracy sometimes fell by the wayside and also that one body might be counted by two different units.\textsuperscript{21} Anderson identifies other problems: because “[c]ommanders and soldiers were aware that a high body count meant progress and would be rewarded…numbers were often inflated….An even worse problem was that Vietnamese civilians were sometimes killed, especially in remote areas, and counted as enemy losses. The troops called it the ‘gook rule’: If it’s dead and Vietnamese, it’s Vietcong.”\textsuperscript{22} The American public learned of the war’s so-called progress through “the evening news, where body counts appeared like box scores on their TV screens.”\textsuperscript{23} As for the military, according to Lawrence F. Kaplan, the body count’s “effect on the U.S. Army was deep and corrosive”: “The relentless charting of dead bodies meant a relentless drive to generate dead bodies—and not always those of the enemy. Falsifying the counts offered one path to promotion. So did dangling one’s own soldiers as bait for the enemy, or the liberal and often indiscriminate use of firepower.”\textsuperscript{24}

Beginning with the 1990th soldier killed, Harkleroad “keep[s] track with tick marks on the dry-erase board mounted on the wall next to his desk”:

- Private Ralph J. Egbert, KIA, Salman Pak. \textit{Tick}.
- Sergeant First Class Israel Munoz, KIA, Sadr City. \textit{Tick}.
- Specialist James D. Agpar, KIA, Sadr City. \textit{Tick}.
- Private Ellis Wheeler Jr., KIA, Mosul. \textit{Tick}.
- Private First Class Andrew C. Mount, KIA, Mosul. \textit{Tick}.
- Second Lieutenant Erika Sheridan, KIA, Adhamiya. \textit{Tick}.
- Specialist Isaiah D. Washington, KIA, Ramadi. \textit{Tick}.
- Specialist Aaron L. Karst, KIA, Ramadi \textit{Tick}.
Private Jamie Rosen, KIA, Ramadi. Tick. (331)

This numerical tracking, along with Gooding’s diary entry reference to “the score [that] hovers at 1996” (323), calls to mind the “scoreboard” Lieutenant Caputo maintained as “death’s bookkeeper” in Philip Caputo’s Vietnam memoir, A Rumor of War:

Once the reports were filed, I brought Colonel Wheeler’s scoreboard up to date….

The vertical columns were headed…KIA, WIA, DOW (died of wounds), NONHOST, VC-KIA, VC-WIA, and VC-POW….In the first four vertical columns were written the number of casualties a particular unit had suffered, in the last three the number it had inflicted on the enemy….The colonel, an easygoing man in most instances, was adamant about maintaining an accurate scoreboard: high-ranking visitors from Danang and Saigon often dropped in unannounced to see how the regiment was performing. And the measures of a unit’s performance in Vietnam were not the distances it had advanced or the victories it had won, but the number of enemy soldiers it had killed (the body count) and the proportion between that number and the number of its own dead (the kill ratio).

Both Harkleroad and Caputo reduce human lives to lines on a board, flesh and blood people to an inch or two of grease pencil or marker. Moreover, for as much as death dehumanizes the individuals (they literally lose their humanity in the process of losing their lives), they are further dehumanized by a process that turns them into nothing more than tick marks in a column headed by military jargon. But Caputo’s work, which at times involves verifying the counts, sickens and upsets him, whereas Harkleroad, who remains on the FOB, at a safe remove from any flesh and blood soldiers, feels no such distress, “playing guessing games” with “that blank spot” on his board (331). Indeed, the novel exaggerates Harkleroad’s dehumanizing of those who have died: when fretting about the number two thousand, Harkleroad does not even think of the dead as
soldiers, as Caputo does. Instead, he thinks of the “ticks marks, inching closer and closer to that grand total score of two thousand American bodies killed since 2003—bullet-riddled, beheaded, and bomb-blown to smithereens” (324, emphasis added). For Harkleroad, the soldiers have been utterly divested of their humanness, becoming bodies, mere piles of skin and bone, before being whittled down even more by various forms of violence and weaponry and alliterative language until they are nothing but lines on a dry-erase board. However much critics may have lamented the discursive callousness during the war in Vietnam, in Iraq the situation seems to have become even more grim; through exaggeration, Fobbit demonstrates the very real dehumanizing effects of modern-day warfare and a contemporary American military-media system that often fails to conceive of service members as real people, as a result of the media’s increased distance from the fighting and technological advances in weaponry. Indeed, the men and women whom Harkleroad’s marks are intended to represent, individuals with families and histories, wishes and disappointments, mean virtually nothing to Harkleroad—that is, until number two thousand comes up, at which point the person assumes a level of importance akin to, or perhaps surpassing, the numbers that cover Caputo’s board.

Further dispelling the notion of Vietnam’s uniqueness, Abrams’s novel utilizes satire to reveal a parallel kind of corrosion in how the contemporary U.S. Army treats death. Though no one in the PA group goes so far as to carry out a public relations coup by orchestrating death number two thousand on a particular soldier, Harkleroad certainly fantasizes about what the ideal target might look like: “[a] Hispanic sergeant who leaves behind a wife and eight children in El Paso when his too-fast Humvee hits a bad bump in the road and flips into a canal” or “[a] milk-fed Midwestern boy, so quickly promoted to captain, barely five years out of West Point, who burns to a crisp in the back of an armored personnel carrier” or perhaps “[a] black female medic
stabbed to death by one of her patients, a crazed Local National whose bandages she’d been so lovingly, tenderly, heroically changing as he lay on a cot in the Combat Support Hospital when, with a sudden crescendoing growl, he reared up, whipped out a box cutter, and sliced her jugular” (331, 331–32, 332). The vividness with which Harkleroad conjures the stories of these imaginary soldiers is disturbing; he imagines for them detailed back stories, complete with families and personality traits, just so he can kill them off in violent, detailed manners—all this, no less, from a man who fails to characterize the individuals who have already died as human beings. Here the text paints Harkleroad as the epitome of a self-serving public affairs man, nearly too awful to bear. Where humor suffuses the PA team’s back-and-forthing about terminology via email, in this instance the satire becomes unsettling. Harkleroad, like the soldiers whose lost lives he notes with a flick of his marker, appears divested of his humanity.27

Further, in remarking on Harkleroad’s belief that “…America deserved a grand, glorious death to mark this most ignoble of occasions (he could never use that phrase, of course, but he sure liked the sound of it)” (332), Fobbit inserts a touch of the mock heroic into the situation. Elevated diction—“grand” and “glorious”—to describe the commonplace occurrence of death becomes even more ridiculous when ascribed to the painful deaths Harkleroad has conjured for his imagined soldiers. Moreover, while the loss of any life is an unfortunate event, attribution of the lofty phrase “this most ignoble of occasions” to the two-thousandth soldier’s demise underscores Harkleroad’s—and by extension, the military’s and media’s—distorted and abnormal fixation with this occurrence. Any number of events connected with the Iraq War, such as the doctored intelligence that led to the invasion and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, stand out as blacker marks on the United States’ record than does the death of a single soldier, and this is
to say nothing of the more than 67,000 civilian casualties, largely Iraqi, that occurred in Iraq within the first two years of the U.S.’s invasion and occupation.28

In an ironic twist, the lieutenant colonel gets his wish regarding the two-thousandth soldier. Harkleroad “prayed to God that Number Two Thousand wouldn’t be just another bland, run-of-the-mill death—blah-blah patrol struck an IED in the neighborhood of blah-blah, killing Private Joe Blah-Blah” (332). Indeed, the two-thousandth American soldier to die in Iraq, Captain Abe Shrinkle, is anything but bland or run-of-the-mill. Instead, he is a public relations nightmare. Less than halfway through the novel, Shrinkle throws a grenade into and blows up a $250,000 Army fuel truck, accidentally killing an Iraqi citizen who was, without anyone’s knowledge, under the vehicle. The last in a series of major missteps, the grenade incident earns Shrinkle a demotion from his field command to the position of manager of the Lifestyle Fitness Center on the forward operating base.29 Seething over his new appointment, Shrinkle eventually finds his way to the Australian pool on the other side of the FOB, a drinking-and-party hot spot that General Order Number Five forbids American military personnel to patronize (226). On his walk to the pool, Shrinkle concocts a civilian identity—Richard Belmouth, assistant curator of Babylonian antiquities at the British Museum. Shrinkle enjoys himself quite a bit with his new “mates” until, after several visits, a mortar comes crashing into the pool in which he alone floats, and Richard Belmouth blows up in a haze of smoke and a splash of bloody water, leaving nothing behind but the stump of a single arm (270).

Harkleroad continues in the mock-heroic vein when, soon after Shrinkle’s death, he frets about “the disgraced American officer (murderer! towel jockey!) who had been masquerading (deception!) as a British national (international complications!) while carousing (drinking! bikinis! swimming!) with the Australians (polynational complications!). It was a scandal on so
many levels he couldn’t even begin to count” (334–35). While Harkleroad’s characterization of Shrinkle as a “disgraced American officer” rings true, the rest of his description is generally overblown. Shrinkle’s killing of the Local National boy was an accident, certainly the result of thoughtless, gross incompetence but not the “deliberate” product of “malice” or “premeditation.”30 As for the “international” and “polynational” aspects of the situation, these amount to mostly a few dozen (laid-back and rather drunk) Australians who very much liked the unfortunate Belmouth, née Shrinkle; any great hostility from this group seems highly unlikely. While the other half of the long-standing U.S.-U.K. “special relationship” might not thrill over Captain Shrinkle’s charade, Prime Minister Tony Blair’s vigorous support for Bush’s Iraq invasion seems sufficient to ensure that something as minor as a bloody arm found poolside near one of Saddam Hussein’s old palaces will not cause any great fuss among the British.31

The idea that Harkleroad develops when called on by the chief of staff, Colonel Belcher, to come up with “a plan…for addressing this little problem of ours in the media” functions, in a variety of ways, as the Iraq War’s public affairs version of the body count alterations from Vietnam (334). Harkleroad suggests “denial of identification”: the Army ought to refuse to declare the body as the American Captain Abe Shrinkle and stick, instead, with the Belmouth story (337). Harkleroad’s plan culminates in “‘wait[ing] for the next casualty to come along—hopefully a more noble death, sir—and mak[ing] that soldier America’s two thousandth’” (338). Essentially, the lieutenant colonel suggests that public affairs construct a better story for the media and, by extension, the American public, by turning the two thousand and first dead soldier into the two-thousandth dead soldier. Though Harkleroad does not actually want to kill someone else, the death of another soldier is inevitable, and Harkleroad proposes a manipulation of the
numbers and the narrative in order to place a different body where the unfortunate captain now
(figuratively) sits. In this way Harkleroad seeks to “generate” a body to replace an existing one.

While some units in Vietnam indiscriminately counted bodies in order to create more
compelling narratives of their success in the field, Harkleroad wants to take the opposite
approach, to *discount* someone who makes for a very inconvenient story. The Vietnam War
again echoes in this inversion of the inflated body count for, as Rufus Phillips says, “‘The
numbers were always several steps removed from what was happening on the ground. Nothing
that went wrong got into the briefings.’”32 As much as numerical manipulation was par for the
course during Vietnam, Abrams’s novel shows that the same occurs during the war in Iraq. How
truly different, then, *Fobbit* asks, is Iraq from the war fought decades ago in the jungles of
southeast Asia? The location of the fighting has changed, as have many of the weapons and the
enemy, but the tactics used by the United States government and military to represent the war to
its own people remain the same.

Moreover, with Harkleroad’s plan regarding Shrinkle/Belmouth, Abrams mocks the Iraq-
era military’s many endeavors to put a shiny spin on things far beyond tarnished, its efforts to
shape a feel-good narrative out of an increasingly bad situation: for example, “the Digital Video
& Imagery Distribution System (DVIDS), the Army-run Web site that feeds positive news and
images to TV stations in the United States—at no cost,” which went live in 2005.33 According to
Sig Christenson,

The Army and its proponents say DVIDS provides a view of the war as captured by
military public affairs that isn’t reported by the news media. They’re almost certainly
right. Propaganda experts, including the University of Houston’s Garth Jowett, however,
worry that the melding of technology, politics and lazy rip-and-read news outlets not
given to crediting their sources deserves a Surgeon General’s warning. They’re right, too.

Will people know the difference between news and official spin?\textsuperscript{34}

But Harkleroad’s idea marches well beyond spin into the realm of outrageous, bold-faced lie; according to chief of staff Colonel Belcher, it sets the foundation for “‘global scandal on an idiotic level.’”\textsuperscript{35} In drawing together the discourses of the wars in Iraq and Vietnam, \textit{Fobbit} undertakes the corrective effort of satire as outlined by Gilbert Highet: the novel “wounds and destroys individuals and groups in order to benefit society as a whole.”\textsuperscript{36} For while Abrams’s novel may not offer much by way of a solution to the problems it identifies—at the text’s close, all Gooding can do is flee the scene of his war—the novel does induce doubt and suspicion and reveal just how far the American military and media have not come since the days of the Vietnam War. Although Belcher ultimately rejects Harkleroad’s plan, proclaiming, “‘IT’S THE WORST IDEA IN THE HISTORY OF MAN!’”, for a moment he appears to give it real consideration (338)—hinting at other potential outrageous ideas and bold-faced lies those in power have passed off as part of the Iraq War narratives filling the pages of America’s newspapers and flickering across its television screens.

\textbf{Fashioning a More Palatable, Appealing War: The Role of Non-Literary Materials}

The mainstream American media by and large followed the Bush administration’s lead with respect to the Iraq War. According to Anthony R. DiMaggio, “Rather than serving as hostile medium, challenging government statements about the war, reporters interpreted their commitment to ‘objectivity’ as excluding or limiting approaches critical to evaluating the Iraq war.”\textsuperscript{37} While major media such as leading newspapers and television news programs typically serve as a powerful force in the framing of news stories, with the war in Iraq, the media
depended almost entirely on official sources such as government officials and military informants and, as such, deferred to official frames, which focused on narratives such as the war on terror and the war of liberation. As Robert Entman explains,

Frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience. The word *salience*…means making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences. An increase in salience enhances the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it, and store it in memory.

The most successful framing efforts leave news readers/viewers with little, if any, impression that they are being told a story that has been shaped by human minds and hands; rather, news consumers believe that they are reading/seeing the truth that just “is.” In the case of Iraq, the vast majority of the early news product was framed successfully, such that the apparatuses of the narratives’ creation were hidden from the public’s view. Before the dropping of the first bombs and throughout the conflict’s early years, the most prominent Iraq War narratives—Iraq as a war on terror, as a war of us vs. them, and as a war of liberation—pervaded American culture so thoroughly that it was as though these narratives existed without the help of any human intervention. Indeed, by relinquishing control of the framing process to the Bush administration, the media helped to naturalize official Iraq War narratives. Although frames are not natural, they function in such a way as to *seem* natural, and so the resulting narratives likewise appear natural and true and, therefore, unquestionable.

*Fobbit* makes visible the constructed nature of these narratives through a variety of non-literary materials whose forms vie for attention: lists, Significant Action reports, press releases, emails, diary entries, and even a mathematical equation. The novel amplifies the effect of their
formal peculiarity by using many of the non-literary sections to present content that is comically satirical, bizarre, or otherwise noteworthy. These nonstandard forms (and their attendant content) highlight the construction of the literary war narrative because of the forms’ artificial feel and the ways in which they depart from the novel’s more conventional style. Many of these forms overtly proclaim themselves as constructions: their unusual formatting or unconventional typeface leaps from the page, announcing itself as the product of human intervention and technology. These forms halt the seamless flow of the third-person war story, interrupting narrative progress midstream, in a figurative and a literal visual way. Moreover, these forms, in their engagement with Iraq War narratives from popular American cultural discourse, the forms point toward the construction of all war narratives, as *Fobbit* demonstrates the slippery nature of language that many readers have come to take for granted. As such, the text’s use of non-literary forms complicates any easy, mindless acceptance of official-media versions of the Iraq War and challenges readers to question their understanding of a conflict that, for a number of years, has had the proverbial book closed on it.

Entries from Gooding’s diary appear several times in *Fobbit*. This form nods toward the subjective element involved in the development of the war narrative, given that a diary serves as an individual’s accounting of events and feelings; it is, by definition, “a daily record of matters affecting the writer personally, or which come under his personal observation” (emphasis added). In addition, the entries’ content at times takes the construction of the war narrative as its subject, while their often-embellished style demonstrates the literary side of the construction of the war. Abrams announces most of the entries with the tag “From the Diary of Chance Gooding Jr.” centered on the page (47). This move serves not merely to set apart the entry from the surrounding text—a feat sufficiently accomplished by the italicized font Abrams
employs for the diary entries—but also to make visible the hand of the author. Abrams the writer becomes evident in this moment, as though he is dropping into the text to declare his part in the making of the story that is unfolding; rather than attempting to disappear, he asserts his presence. Paired with a description of Abrams’s military/public affairs background on the inside of the novel’s jacket and a jacket summary that begins “Based on the author’s own experiences serving in Iraq,” the journal technique invites consideration of the ways in which the author’s personal experience of the war, his opinions and highly subjective impressions, have naturally helped to form the war narrative at hand. In other words, does not engage in even the pretense of objectivity.

In one early entry, Gooding’s stylistic flourishes remind the reader of the written aspect of the literary war narrative:

*For now, soldiers, Local Nationals, American contractors, and Third World Employees (known as “Twees”) move through the gravel streets engineers have quickly and roughly laid between fifteen rows of trailers. Triumph’s residents move like ants, orderly and focused, as they go about the business of supporting a war that crackles across Baghdad, well outside the sandbag-fortified entry control points where guards check ID badges, hold mirrors on poles like giant dentist tools to look at the undercarriages of trucks, and German shepherds pull against leashes as they sniff for bombs. Vehicles are forced to navigate a quarter mile of concrete barricades, slowing them to a crawl as they wind their serpentine way onto the base. By the time a suicide bomber cleared the last barrier, he would have been killed five times over by the soldiers at the gate. He’d be riddled with bullets—turned to a bleeding wedge of Swiss cheese—before his lips could even form the words, “Allahu Akbar!”*
Far from matter-of-fact in his portrayal of the base and its goings-on, Gooding utilizes a number of literary elements in his description, elements that impart the feeling of a piece of literature, the sense that the words and phrases have been carefully thought about and planned. Gooding employs colorful language such as the verb “crackles” to describe the war and the adjective “serpentine” to characterize the course traveled by vehicles entering the base; similes to describe the FOB’s residents who “move like ants, orderly and focused,” as well as “the mirrors on poles [that look] like giant dentist tools”; a hyperbole for the imagined suicide bomber who “would have been killed five times over” before making it fully onto the base; and also a metaphor for this bomber, who would be “turned into a bleeding wedge of Swiss cheese” during the course of his efforts (48). Rather than an off-the-cuff impression of the base, Gooding seems to have pondered and potentially even revised his portrayal so as to create the most interesting possible description of FOB Triumph. The result, in short, resembles a literary construct. While Gooding’s war narrative is private—“a document he kept buried in a labyrinth of folders and subfolders on the hard drive” (10)—the text nevertheless insinuates that the staff sergeant’s literary bent could influence the future retelling of war stories to his family members, friends, and even strangers. Individuals like Gooding, whom Nicholas Basbanes calls Abrams’s “alter ego,” are precisely those who come back from the war and add their very subjective versions of events to the war narratives already swirling throughout American culture, a fact the author seems keen to put at the front and center of his war novel.

Indeed, the journal sections of the novel unsettle the privileging of autobiographical writing by suggesting how untrustworthy such writing can be. The third-person narrator focalized through Gooding as much as admits Gooding’s likelihood to embellish when, late in the novel, Gooding’s uniform gets bloodied at the FOB’s aid station as the result of a botched IV
job following a bout of food poisoning: he “saw the dark-red stain that ran the entire length of his left thigh….But that was okay by Gooding. When he returned to Georgia, maybe he could wear the uniform into the local American Legion and it would get him a few free beers from all the old battle-scarred veterans sitting at the bar. ‘Hey, look who’s here,’ they’d say. ‘Rambo from Iraq’” (306–07). Like many Fobbits, Gooding relishes the opportunity to tell the story of a more dangerous war upon his return to the States. He certainly does not seek to live a more dangerous war, however. Of his illness Gooding writes in his diary, “To write about one’s bowels is an embarrassing thing. But in this case it is necessary, in order to understand how I came to shed blood for the first—and hopefully the last—time here in Iraq” (293). The diary’s profession of an embarrassing truth increases the document’s believability. While the embellished, gutsy, dangerous war story (not unlike the sort about which Harkleroad boasts in emails to his mother) makes for an alluring narrative, it does not make for an alluring lived experience, at least not for the likes of Gooding and the other Fobbits. Regardless of his reticence for “real” action, however, Gooding will not shy away from fabricating a war narrative that turns him into some kind of shoot-em’-up movie hero.

Other entries further draw attention to the construction of the Iraq War narrative. For example, Gooding writes,

*The division task force is now heavily engaged in an offensive against the terrorists, called Operation Squeeze Play. Over here, a tactical operation is not a tactical operation until it has been christened with a code word. There are entire offices in the Pentagon and here in Iraq whose job it is to sit around and come up with clever names like Operation Righteous Fury or Operation Coffin Nail. Once, during cold and flu season, one of our brigade commanders came up with Operation Influenza and*
Operation Barking Cough.

Just this week, the task force commander decreed:

“Every time a platoon-sized element or larger rolls out the gate, it’s to be a named operation.”

Roger that, sir. Pretty soon, we’ll have “Operation Go to the Bathroom” or “Operation I Just Need to Gas Up the Humvee.”

No, but really, the dweeby guys in our planning cell come up with the cutest names for these daylong or weeklong combat operations where Iraqi and U.S. soldiers go into the neighborhoods to flush out terrorists. Yesterday, it was Drake, Pintail, and Mallard; today, it was Chicken Little. (92–93)⁴⁶

The novel here ridicules the government/military’s attention to seeming minutiae while a war wages on and human beings lose their lives. While seemingly trivial, however, the names this passage satirizes also bring to mind recent military operational naming foibles that carried with them significant political and ideological implications. A name with religious connotations such as “Operation Righteous Fury” reminds readers of the war in Afghanistan, which was initially named Operation Infinite Justice “until,” as Arundhati Roy notes, “it was pointed out that this could be seen as an insult to Muslims, who believe that only Allah can mete out infinite justice.”⁴⁷ The Bush administration then changed the name to Operation Enduring Freedom.

With regard to the Iraq War, the real-life mistake seems at once more comical and disingenuous. The initial code name for the conflict, Operation Iraqi Liberation, played directly on the war of liberation narrative, appealing to the American people’s desire to aid an oppressed populace and spread democracy. The administration, however, swiftly changed this name “to Operation Iraqi Freedom as soon as it realized that Operation Iraqi Liberation yielded the
Numerous critics before, during, and after the conflict suspected that Iraq’s oil reserves served as a major motivating factor in Bush’s drive toward war, but the administration denied these claims, and “[j]ournalists seeking to raise the important question of Iraqi oil were quickly marginalized by officials as uninformed and unprofessional.” Dilip Hiro, however, cites examples of Bush’s interest in Iraqi oil from early in his presidential tenure and asserts, “During the chaos in the wake of the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, it was only the oil ministry that the Pentagon’s forces guarded diligently. If, in the end, nothing came of Washington’s oil ambitions in Iraq, it was because of the mayhem and violence that followed the Pentagon’s swift military victory and the intense Iraqi nationalism that holds the country’s oil dear.”

By focusing on the naming of military operations, Gooding’s diary entry places attention on an aspect of the war narrative that war planners intend to go virtually unnoticed at the same time that it serves their ideological ends. As Gregory C. Sieminski asserts, “[N]aming an operation is tantamount to seizing the high ground in waging a public relations campaign.” With the exception of “Righteous Fury,” however, the names in Gooding’s diary fall far short of winning American hearts and minds, since names such as “Squeeze Play,” “Babe Ruth,” “Khadhimiya Shortstop,” and “Home Plate” gesture toward a game. A name such as “Operation Chicken Little” all but makes a mockery of the military effort it describes, defying a crucial operation-naming tenet of Winston Churchill—whose effect on the American military’s practice of naming operations has been documented—which he explains in a letter written to General Hastings Ismay during World War II: the name of an operation, says the British prime minister, should not “disparage it in any way” nor should the name “enable some widow or mother to say that her son was killed in an operation ‘Bunnyhug’ or ‘Ballyhoo.’” Given that the novel centers on a war that failed to uncover even a single weapon of mass destruction, it seems no small
coincidence that the most disparaging code word that Gooding relates in this entry takes its name from a centuries-old folktale telling of the fallout caused by mass hysteria about an overblown disaster.

Another non-literary form that draws attention to the construction of the war narrative is “a bulleted list of do’s and don’ts” that Gooding gives to Specialist Kyle Pilley in preparation for Pilley’s interview with the mainstream media. Pilley’s interview is set to follow his survival of a close-range shooting by a sniper and his chasing and tackling of the assailants—all of which was filmed by insurgents and “intended for a propaganda ‘victory music video’ loaded onto the jihadists’ Web site that afternoon but instead played and replayed by CNN in the ensuing days” (208). The list reads:

- **Do** sit up straight in the chair
- **Do** wear glasses if you can’t see without them
- **Do** use frequent but natural hand gestures
- **Do** smile (when appropriate)
- **Do** look concerned and sincere (when appropriate)
- **Do** take every opportunity to “tell the Army story”
- **Don’t** speculate about things you don’t know (“Stay in your lane!!”)
- **Don’t** tap dance around difficult questions
- **Don’t** roll or shift your eyes
- **Don’t** let the reporter put words in your mouth
- **Don’t** conduct the interview on an empty stomach
- **Don’t** consume flatulence-producing foods (beans, vegetables, et cetera) twelve hours prior
o **Don’t** give vivid descriptions of “kills” that may be shocking to nonmilitary individuals

o **Don’t** ever forget: “We are WINNING the Global War on Terrorism” (208–09)

The directives for how to comport oneself continue into dialogue, with Gooding advising Pilley “to avoid acronyms and military jargon at all costs” and to “[s]tay positive, to the degree that you can,” but it is the list itself—which is provided to Specialist Pilley on “a card, laminated to slip smoothly into and out of his wallet”—that conveys the real power of the commands (209, 208). By employing bullet points and bold-faced type at the beginning of each directive and positioning the list in the midst of the novel’s standard typeface, the novel calls attention to the artificiality of the orders. The visual form resembles a PowerPoint presentation or a list of “do’s and don’ts” in a women’s magazine; the openly fake form boils down its recipient’s actions to a dozen or so deeds that can be reproduced from one individual to the next. This media-savvy list works to construct a very specific sort of war story and soldier-character: it coaches recipients like Pilley to appear sincere, earnest, and friendly, when, very possibly, many of the traits are not genuine (hence the need for the card); to avoid the creation of potential anti-military sentiment by refraining from behaviors that recipients might perform naturally as a function of their training and experience, such as describing “kills”; and to keep the mainstream media from gaining control of the story. In the end, the list aims to help Pilley and other service members who find themselves in the position of interviewee tell a tale that the U.S. military deems suitable for public consumption (“the Army story”), which, in large part, means advancing the war on terror narrative—as the last item explicitly states.

The novel again employs the list form with Gooding’s “list of Forbidden Words,” which includes “the latest inane verbal turd[s] that dropped out of the mouths around division
headquarters.” Rather than the neat bullet points of the PA list, Gooding’s list exhibits a more off-the-cuff format:

**Iraqi Face** (as in “we have to put an Iraqi Face on this news story to take the emphasis off U.S. involvement”)

**Global Cosmopolitan Media**

**Information Dominance** (favored by Corps PAO)

**Iraqidocious** (favored by Major Filipovich)

**Pretzel logic** (practiced by Lieutenant Colonel Harkleroad)

**Metric assload** (as in “I’ve got a metric assload of ammunition to deliver to the battalion tomorrow”)

**Iraqinization**

**Baghdad Ladies** (as in “I know a dude over in Logistics who goes up to the chief’s office every day, begging like a Baghdad Lady”)

**Pole-vaulting over mouse turds** (i.e., worrying about the inconsequential and insignificant)

**Nexterday** (157–58)

So rendered, Gooding’s list resembles something that an average person might keep on “a yellow legal pad at his desk” (157) and signals the element of human intervention involved in the construction of the story of war. The list reveals the Iraq War as a linguistic construct: something to joke about and turn into neologisms, something that gains its discursive shape through the words of human beings. The war as the public knows it is not, as official-media framing leads Americans to believe, something that just naturally “is.” In addition, the style of several of the
entries (e.g., “Iraqi Face” and “Baghdad ladies”) calls to mind a dictionary, which typically provides an example sentence utilizing the defined word or phrase. This style reinforces the notion of the literary war narrative as a construct, as it encourages consideration of the narrative first on the level of individual words or phrases—each existing as its own separate entity with its own individual meaning or meanings—before moving to sentences and then larger units such as paragraphs or chapters. By styling the words or phrases in a way similar to a dictionary, the narrative highlights its component parts, thereby drawing attention to the various stand-alone units that come together to create the story of war and, further, suggesting the variety of distinct and highly individualized ways in which this narrative could take shape.

The human beings who construct the story of the war possess agendas, as demonstrated by “Iraqi Face” and “Information Dominance” (157). Terms such as these illustrate the Army’s endeavors to control and alter the focus of news stories, calling to mind the notion of spin, “the ubiquitous term for public relations tactics[,]…initially applied to the news management techniques of political parties and the image-polishing of politicians…but [which] has recently come to be used in relation to corporate and government activities.”57 In putting an “Iraqi Face” on a piece of news, the Army accomplishes several goals at once: it shapes a military-friendly tale by downplaying U.S. involvement in Iraq yet casting said involvement in a favorable light, while at the same time adding another page to the war of liberation narrative, as the newly free, American-assisted Iraqis take center stage in what is no doubt an uplifting story. With “Iraqinization,” Vietnam resonates through a parallel to the policy of Vietnamization, in which the American administration attempted to increase South Vietnamese responsibility for the war effort and decrease U.S. involvement after 1967. “Information Dominance” refers to the public affairs office’s desire to maintain power over all facts, details, ideas, etc., circulating with regard
to the Iraq War. Users of conversational phrases such as “Pole-vaulting over mouse turds,” “Metric assload,” and “Baghdad ladies” (156), however, are unlikely to get much farther than the palace (or Gooding’s yellow legal pad). In its reference to animal fecal matter, the first phrase demonstrates a crudeness inappropriate for official communication, while “assload” teeters on the brink of a Federal Communications Commission profanity offense. A far cry from the politically correct language of official statements and military jargon, a term such as “Baghdad Ladies” is forbidden because it reveals a racist point of view and therefore fails to conform to accepted and projected models of propriety and decency.

Immediately following Gooding’s forbidden words list is an email “message trail that had come down from higher headquarters,” which reveals the constructedness of the war on terror narrative and the Army’s efforts to tell a story that conforms to this narrative (158). The email chain consists of four messages sent over roughly twenty-nine hours by Major Lesser, Deputy Chief of Strategic Communication, Multi-Corps-Iraq, Baghdad Branch; Brigadier General Harold Gunderson, Chief of Public Affairs Division, Multi-Allied-Forces Iraq; and Lieutenant Colonel Harkleroad. While Harkleroad plays a central role in the novel’s PA drama, Lesser and Gunderson are characters whom the reader knows only through their messages. The emails, which have been sent to various others (including Gooding) and in Gunderson’s case copied to the PA listserv, focus on the PA group’s usage of the terms terrorist and insurgent. Fobbit presents the messages in true-to-life email format, rendering them in an alternate font, centered on the page, and complete with sender, recipients, time and date stamp, subject line, greeting, message, closing, and signature. The emails provide a direct look at the personalities, viewpoints, interpersonal politics, and motives that coalesce into a lexicon of the war. Whereas utilizing selections of individual emails would allow for partial consideration of these elements, the
novel’s inclusion of the emails in their entirety allows the messages to exist without outside interpretation from the narrator or the novel’s characters. As such, the reader’s individual interpretation plays a crucial role in the creation of the war narrative. Furthermore, the form of the messages calls attention to their function as written texts: they exist as typed messages, sent from one person to several others, physically creating the story of the Iraq War as they appear on the page and interact with, comment upon, and revise previous messages.

The exchange commences with an email from Major Lesser, the lowest ranking of the three officers:

From: reginald_t_lesser@multicorpsiraq.mil
To: eustace.harkleroad@us.army.mil, jack.birch@u.s.army.mil, frances.finkle@u.s.army.mil, jeff.jefferson@u.s.af.mil, edward_m_lesser@multicorpsiraq.mil, david_p_adams@multicorpsiraq.mil, rtp@yahoo.com, milreporter@gmail.com

29 JUNE 2005 0849hrs

Subject: Informal Public Affairs Guidance Regarding Current Use of Terms

All:

This is a friendly reminder that we need to cease and desist our habitual use of the term “insurgent.” Remember, we now have a democratic country with an elected transitional government that we so wonderfully helped install. This is no longer a provincial puppet gov’t ruled by an evil puppeteer. The Iraqis are fast approaching something that resembles Philadelphia, circa 1776. Anyway, bottom lining it: Sunnis and other extremists are targeting and killing civilians along with Iraqi Security Forces. There is no discriminate use of force on the part of the attackers—it’s a free country and violence is a free-for-all, just like it is in any democracy.
Our intel reports indicate that at least a significant portion of the violence is imported from outside the borders of Iraq, so one can’t reliably call them rebels.

Thus we here at STRATCOM consider your prolonged use of labels not only politically incorrect but grammatically improper. “Insurgent” lends a dignity the thugs and murderers opposing us don’t deserve. The word is too palatable for our audiences.

Therefore we are asking you to cease and desist with “insurgent” and use “terrorist” instead.

Again, just a friendly reminder.

V/R

MAJ Reginald Lesser

Deputy Chief, Strategic Communications

MCI, Baghdad Branch (158–59)

Lesser takes issue with the term insurgent because it fails to characterize the opposing forces in what he views as a sufficiently negative way. His team at STRATCOM deems them “thugs” and “murderers” who lack “dignity,” and, in the opinion of Lesser and his colleagues, insurgent lacks such connotation. While much of the military’s storytelling efforts aim at telling a more palatable story—which involves removing the blood, guts, and gore from narratives of the Iraq War (see later discussion)—in this instance, Lesser considers insurgent to be too palatable because it casts the bad guys as not quite bad enough. Instead he prefers terrorist, a word the brigadier general discusses at some length later in the exchange. Lesser provides his email’s recipients with something of a mini civics lesson by way of demonstrating that their usage of insurgent has been incorrect. Despite the major’s twice noting that his message serves as a “friendly reminder,” he
hardly seems friendly in his assertion that those continuing to use insurgent are wrong on the levels of both politics and grammar (158, 159).

The personal motivations that play into the creation of the war narrative become apparent with Harkleroad’s response email, sent to members of his staff fewer than five hours after Lesser’s original message. Harkleroad has “queried higher HQ” on the subject of insurgent vs. terrorist and learned that Lesser’s “guidance was premature. The folks at Multi-Corps Iraq are only considering a change at this time. Don’t jump the gun. We’ll still use INSURGENTS for now” (159, 159–60). Harkleroad’s email reveals an attempt at one-upmanship, of vying for professional status; he here engages in a proverbial pissing match with Lesser, a major whom Harkleroad, a lieutenant colonel, outranks. Continually plagued by insecurities (which manifest in the form of repeated nosebleeds and, in emails to his mother, outlandish lies about his military exploits), Harkleroad goes over the major’s head to learn whether Lesser’s statements about terminology are official mandates, and, finding that they are not, Harkleroad asserts his authority, in however minor a way, to control the war narrative. Tellingly, Harkleroad excludes Lesser and others listed in the original email from his list of recipients. Although Harkleroad asserts himself in this instance, he does so only to members of his own staff; his small bit of courage extends only as far as Gooding and the others who are directly under his command.

While Harkleroad’s email demonstrates how the words used to tell the story of war can depend upon the ego of an individual storyteller, Major Lesser’s response illustrates the way in which professional politics affect the story of war and also how storytellers can get caught up in the process of construction. Despite his exclusion from Harkleroad’s list of recipients, Lesser apparently catches wind of the email, as the third message in the trail serves as an obvious response to Harkleroad’s statements. Lesser writes: “At the present time, there is no OFFICIAL
guidance to change use of terminology. I may have miscommunicated when I said earlier that there is a move. There is no move, only a suggestion on our part. SUGGESTION does not mean DIRECTIVE.”

Here the conversation shifts from concern with the definition of insurgent, an issue of content, to an implied concern with the definitions of suggestion and directive, an issue of policy. While the overarching concern remains the narrative of the Iraq War, the subject has become the (unspoken) question of who possesses the power to define the terms that will define the war. As Lesser writes moments later, “Words are important. Words can wound, maim, and kill.” The major clearly seeks to ameliorate any professional damage he may have done by overstepping the boundaries of his rank and office with his earlier email when he suggests, “Perhaps a few poolside drinks over here in the Green Zone are in order! Look forward to seeing you!” and signs his message “Cheers” (160). The friendliness insisted upon in, but missing from, his first email appears in this message in an attempt to smooth ruffled feathers, and, at least for the next few hours, the Iraq War narrative continues as a story of insurgents wreaking havoc in a fledgling democracy.

The final word on the matter, however, comes from a brigadier general who outranks Harkleroad by two positions and Lesser by three and who heads up the U.S. military’s PA efforts in Iraq. Brigadier General Gunderson writes,

Subject: AIF Semantics

Gentlemen,

Word has reached our office about increased confusion regarding use of “terrorist,” “insurgent,” and all associated terms. After much discussion behind closed doors and numerous consultations with our cultural liaison staffers, we have come to a decision point regarding the bomb planters.
Multi-Corps-Iraq has decided to get away from the term “insurgent” because of its formal definition: *a person who revolts against civil authorities or an established government*. In other words, a rebel but not necessarily a belligerent. He could merely be one who acts contrary to the policies and decisions of one’s own political party. Indeed, our very nation was founded on the principles of rebellion and it would not be out of line to call great men like Alexander Hamilton, Henry Clay, and Paul Revere “insurgents.” So, to link what’s going on here in Iraq at the street level to the glorious cause of our nation is, in my opinion, a travesty, and frankly, something that turns my stomach.

Bearing that in mind, the term “insurgent” is thus not entirely correct for this particular phase or time of the newly reborn Iraqi government.

Whereas the term “terrorist,” whereby a deranged individual employs a systematic use of terror as a means of coercion, is a more appropriate and acceptable term to use in our briefings, press releases, and everyday conversation. “Criminal” can also be used as a substitute in some cases, by its definition: one who has committed a crime against a lawful government.

So we will no longer dignify these horrible, despicable creatures with the title of “insurgent.” I am directing all subordinate staff members to immediately start calling them what they are: **TERRORISTS**. We are, I need not remind you, currently waging the Global War on **Terrorism**.60

Calling on a variety of words in his email—*terrorist, insurgent, rebel, belligerent, criminal*—Gunderson employs formal definition to develop his case for and against various terms to name
the “bomb planters” (perhaps itself the most value neutral of the options, as it depicts only the individuals’ actions while attributing to them no motives or ancillary connections). *Insurgent* is insufficient because its definition excludes the element of belligerence and thus fails to highlight the violent, aggressive nature of the perpetrator’s acts. Further, the word’s suggestion of rebellion calls to Gunderson’s mind the American Revolution and the “great men” who participated—a connection he finds sickening.61 With the example of “criminal,” Gunderson implies that the transitional Iraqi government serves as a “lawful” one (161), a sentiment shared by major American print establishments such as the *New York Times*, the *New Republic*, and the *Washington Post*, whose stories, according to DiMaggio, “create[d] the impression that the Iraqi government [wa]s a sovereign body and a legitimate representative of the Iraqi people.”62 These stories bolster the Iraq War as war-of-liberation narrative, and, indeed, within the American media establishment “it ha[d] become popular to refer to the self-rule and self-determination of Iraq as a guiding principle motivating U.S. foreign policy, particularly after the creation of the interim Iraqi government in June 2004 and the democratic election in 2005.”63 Viewed as a legitimate and lawful body that represents the people of the state of Iraq, the Iraqi government is, therefore, one against which “criminals” can perpetrate offenses.

With Gunderson’s settling on *terrorist* as the term *par excellence*, the reader witnesses the construction of the war on terror narrative in action. Where other terms (e.g., *insurgent*, *rebel*) fail, *terrorist* succeeds because it does not “dignify” the bomb planters but instead casts them as insane and irrational (“deranged”) persons who take an organized (“systematic”) approach to the use of fear and violence (“use of terror”) in order to intimidate and compel others (“means of coercion”) (161).64 *Terrorist*, in other words, makes the United States’s enemies look satisfactorily bad. Use of the term *terrorist* to refer to the bomb planters of course makes
abundant sense given that—as Gunderson says he “need[s] not remind” the recipients of his email—the U.S. is “currently waging the Global War on Terrorism” (162). The Global War on Terrorism, according to Amy Zalman and Jonathan Clarke, “acted as what, in the language of semiotics, is called a ‘floating signifier,’ able to be attached at will to a wide range of actions and policies.” As Daniel Chandler explains, “An ‘empty’ or ‘floating signifier’ is variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable, or nonexistent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even any signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean.” As a result of the variability of the Global War on Terrorism’s signification in official and public discourse, say Zalman and Clarke, “the al-Qaeda perpetrators of September 11 and Saddam Hussein were organized into seamless and coherent chapters in the same account. The war on terror narrative led directly to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, to the establishment of an archipelago of detention camps, and to a vast expansion of surveillance systems inside the United States.” In his email, Gunderson employs the “Global War on Terrorism” without any pomp or circumstance—without any explanation whatsoever. He takes it for granted that his recipients share his interpretation of the term (whatever that may be), an assumption that leaves unclear what, precisely, Gunderson’s interpretation includes and excludes. In using this term, Gunderson seems to intend everything and nothing all at once, a strategy that brings into sharp relief the fact that he is constructing a story of the Iraq War as he goes along and taking his readers (both of the email and the novel) right along with him.

As the highest ranking officer involved in the debate over bomb planters, insurgents, and so on, Brigadier General Gunderson wins the day: he decrees terrorist the new law of the military’s public affairs land and it becomes so. Indeed, as Entman notes, “the frame in a news
text is really the imprint of power—it registers the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text,” and, in this case, Gunderson dominates. But, although those in positions of power intend for the shift to happen behind closed doors—on the computer screens and within the inboxes of a handful of members of the U.S. Army—the email format within the novel makes the invisible visible. This form lays bare the complex linguistic and political maneuvering involved with topics such as (in)appropriate word choice, topics about which those in power would prefer the average person did not think.

Revision Makes Perfect: Genre-switching, Constructing Death, and the Quest for a Better Story

In *Fobbit* the Iraq War never simply happens; rather, members of the PA team carefully craft and shape versions of the war’s events and then, ultimately, release them to the world in the form of press releases. This situation comes as little surprise given that, around the world, media systems dominate national political systems, foreign policy affairs, and international relations, such that “images of what is happening in the world are given greater significance than what is really happening.” Though the *Fobbit* PA team traffics in words rather than images, the sentiment nevertheless holds true: in the pages of Abrams’s novel, the linguistically constructed version of an occurrence carries more weight than the occurrence itself. Gooding, Harkleroad, and minor public affairs characters such as chief of staff Colonel Belcher and Major Filipovich work in earnest to turn the sometimes gruesome, sometimes banal, sometimes politically incorrect happenings of the Iraq War into stories that encourage the American public to take pride in its nation’s military and in U.S. involvement in the war. Such endeavors, however, often require no small amount of effort on the parts of the authors: as White says of the writing of history, “The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of them and the
highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play.”

To put it another way, the public affairs staff undertakes quite a task in the course of (re)writing history in the form of a six-sentence press release. Moreover, through the press release genre, Abrams’ text gestures toward the ways in which the Vietnam War laid the discursive groundwork for the Iraq War.

The demise of Staff Sergeant Harding, an American soldier on patrol, offers a telling example of the complex nature—and linguistic manipulation—of death. Though “at the start of his deployment” Gooding had “been a death virgin,” five months into his tour, “[d]eath was just one of the commodities he traded on a daily basis” (9), but, like so much else in the world of public affairs in Iraq, death is far from simple. SSG Harding’s death figures importantly in *Fobbit*’s first chapter, gaining representation through third-person narration, dialogue, and a Significant Action report. Each of these genres reveals important aspects of the novel’s narrative construction of death and urges reconsideration of a concept that might normally be taken for granted with regard to the story of war. Moreover, parallels between the military language used to describe death in Iraq and in Vietnam underscores a continuing legacy of white-washing difficult concepts.

Far from telling a narrative of heroic sacrifice or bravery, Gooding’s third-person narration relates death as an unremarkable byproduct of the Iraq War, describing Harding’s demise in rather pitiless terms. The novel first mentions the death in passing, and rather callously, in third-person narration from Gooding’s point of view in the opening chapter:

On the day a soldier was roasted in the fire of an IED in al-Karkh and then, in a separate attack, a suicide bomber rammed into the back of an Abrams tank, Gooding’s
deployment clock was at 183 days with another 182 days to go (plus or minus 60 days, depending on extension orders, which would come from the Pentagon at any minute…).

Halfway there. The tipping point. The downhill slide. (3)

Though Harding’s death begins the sentence and indeed the entire paragraph, the death appears in a prepositional phrase that indicates a temporal moment to situate the sentence’s main subject matter, which is Gooding’s time spent and remaining in Iraq. The death of SSG Harding serves as introductory material, as a tangential detail to the sentence’s primary content. Moreover, Harding’s death shares the introductory spotlight with another incident, thereby further undermining the death’s importance. Neither hero nor martyr, the staff sergeant—as cast by Gooding—dies a rather gruesome death with no fanfare whatsoever.

Soon after this initial mention of SSG Harding’s demise, the novel describes the al-Karkh incident at length in a Significant Action (Sig Act) report that attempts to sanitize the fact of death. Sent to Casualty Section via email, Sig Act reports arrive “in capital letters, shouting in military jargon”:

SOLDIER ON MOUNTED PATROL TRAVELING IN VICINITY OF AL-KARKH WATER TREATMENT PLANT
FLAGGED DOWN BY IRAQI CITIZEN CLAIMING AN IED 200 METERS AHEAD. SSG HARDING AND TWO OTHER MEMBERS OF THE PATROL DISMOUNTED M1114 TO SEARCH FOR IED EVIDENCE. TWO ADDITIONAL SOLDIERS SEARCHED ADJACENT FIELDS FOR WIRES, BAGS OF GARBAGE, ANIMAL CORPSES, ETC. INDICATING LOCATION OF IED.
SSG HARDING ALSO WALKED FORWARD, BUT REMAINED ON THE ROAD. IED WAS ONLY 30 METERS AHEAD OF SOLDIERS. AS TEAM MOVED FORWARD, IED EXPLODED, CAUSING IMMEDIATE AMPUTATION OF SSG HARDING’S FOUR LIMBS. FRAGMENTS OF IED ALSO PENETRATED SSG HARDING’S HELMET, RESULTING IN MASSIVE HEAD INJURY AND SUBSEQUENT DEATH. UNIT CONDUCTED IMMEDIATE CORDON AND SEARCH FOLLOWING THE ATTACK TO FIND RESPONSIBLE PARTY OR PARTIES AND DETAINED FOR FURTHER QUESTIONING ONE POSSIBLE WITNESS, THE INDIVIDUAL WHO ORIGINALLY WARNED THEM ABOUT THE IED. (6)

Rather than employing a simple and direct statement such as “Harding was blown apart and killed by an IED,” the Sig Act utilizes sanitized phrasings that attempt to cloak the goriness of war. With its use of “that clinical, euphemistic language the military prefers to simple English,” the Sig Act report echoes the official casualty reports described by Philip Caputo in “The Officer in Charge of the Dead,” the second part of his Vietnam War memoir *A Rumor of War* (1977). Reassigned from his Marine brigade in the field to the rear echelon as an assistant adjutant in charge of documenting casualties, Lieutenant Caputo notes, “If, say, a marine had been shot through the guts, I could not write ‘shot through the guts,’ or ‘shot through the stomach’; no, I
had to say ‘GSW’ (gunshot wound) ‘through and through, abdomen.’” Of the virtually indescribable damage done to some marines bodies, he writes,

> sometime that year, Lieutenant Colonel Meyers, one of the regiment’s battalion commanders, stepped on a booby-trapped 155-mm shell. They did not find enough of him to fill a willy-peter bag, a waterproof sack a little larger than a shopping bag. In effect, Colonel Meyers had been disintegrated, but the official report read something like “traumatic amputation, both feet; traumatic amputation, both legs and arms; multiple lacerations to abdomen; through-and-through fragment wounds, head and chest.” Then came the notation “killed in action.”

Like the Sig Act from Iraq, the Vietnam-era casualty report lists every type of damage the booby trap enacted upon the colonel’s body in euphemistic as opposed to straightforward language. “Foregrounding the role of abstract language in couching the truth of death within a framework acceptable to American myth, Caputo hones in on how the Corps narrated KIAs, or those killed-in-action, or WIAs, or those wounded in action,” explains Ty Hawkins. “At the heart of Caputo’s work here,” Hawkins continues, “is an effort to render visible the evil attendant to systematic killing, which is obscured by both the euphemisms with which the military softens the fact of death, as well as the warrior-hero ideal itself, insofar as it mystifies the soldier’s role as an agent-victim of death.” These discursive techniques carry over into the Iraq War where, as Abrams’s novel shows, the military attempts to use language as a tool to distance human bodies from the fact of their own death. This is perhaps even more successful in Iraq than in Vietnam, because where Caputo is traumatized by his experience and plagued by nightmares about it, Gooding manages to avoid a physical confrontation with the results of war and thus remains, in comparison, relatively unscathed.
Fobbit’s opening chapter draws attention to the malleability of the concept of death. Gooding interacts with Private First Class Semple and Private First Class Anderson, minor characters who “worked in the division’s G-1 Casualty Section and were in charge of cataloguing the dead. They sat at their desks in headquarters and waited for e-mails to pop into their in-boxes, announcing the serious injury or death of another soldier who’d been scythed by the Grim Reaper while out on patrol” (5–6). Gooding, having finished the press release announcing Harding’s death, comes to Semple and Anderson to determine if they have received confirmation of the staff sergeant’s death. When Gooding learns that the palace’s internet server is down and that the doctor’s email therefore cannot get through to Casualty, he frustratedly proclaims,

“CNN just announced this guy’s death and they have footage of a body wearing a U.S. uniform being hauled from the blast site on a stretcher.”

“You know the drill, Sar’nt,” Semple said. “He ain’t dead until we get the e-mail from the docs at Camp Bucca saying he’s dead."

“And you can’t pick up the phone and call.”

“C’mon, Sar’nt. You know it has to be official and in writing. We can’t go vocal on casualty confirmation.”

…“So,” Gooding said, “even though you know he’s dead and I know he’s dead and by now his momma probably knows he’s dead, the dude’s not really dead, is that what you’re telling me?”

Semple leveled a flat gaze at Gooding and clicked his equally dead in-box. “He ain’t officially dead yet.”

“What about unofficially?”
“Unofficially, yeah. He’s road meat. But if anyone asks, you didn’t hear it from me.” (13–14).

In this exchange of dialogue, death—the ultimate end of war—enters the Derridean realm of language: “there is nothing outside of the text,” or, as Derrida later clarifies, “there is nothing outside of context.” 75 The soldier has stopped breathing, his heart no longer beats, and his brain function has ceased (on top of this, all of his limbs have been amputated); for those in the medical community as well as the average layperson, these qualities signify the loss of the soldier’s life. In other words, in the everyday world, the soldier is dead. For the purposes of the narrative that the military plans to release to the media, however, the signifier dead has become a function of documentation. Death, in the official military-media context, has only taken place once someone working in a certain profession (a doctor) verifies in a specific way (via written communication) that it has, in fact, occurred. 76 For the purposes of the military’s categorizing and documenting efforts, then, the soldier on CNN presumably exists in some strange sort of limbo, neither alive nor dead—he is, rather, a topic better not discussed at this moment. To be sure, erroneous reports of deaths by the military cause no small amount of suffering to service members’ families and friends; even so, Fobbit’s use of dialogue, and particularly Gooding and Semple’s back-and-forthing about “official” and “unofficial” deadness, highlights the absurdity that inheres in the military’s attempt to lay claim to a concept so seemingly obvious to most people. If, in the lexicon of the Iraq War, deadness has become a matter not of breath and a beating heart but rather a function of how it is documented and by whom, then conventionally agreed upon meaning takes a back seat to military bureaucracy and policy-making. Indeed, the obsessiveness of the military’s modes of operation appears to have usurped the integrity of standard, everyday communication.
One of the key modes of conveying death in the novel is the official military press release, a concise yet telling document. Typically six-lines in length, the press release aims to convey information of operational and public relations import (e.g., news of an IED explosion or the bravery of American soldiers) in a way that appears to be both based in fact and flattering to the U.S. military effort in Iraq. Although “to the majors, lieutenant colonels, colonels, and generals running around division headquarters in a constant state of ass-pucker, the press release was just as important as an edict from the pope,” Gooding thinks the press release is “just another useless, redundant scrap of information in the reporters’ email in-boxes [that] eight times out of ten would be deleted without being read” (61, 60–61). *Fobbit* lays on the satire thickly in the description of the hoops and hurdles a press release must go through in order to see the world beyond the palace: written by Staff Sergeant Gooding with oversight (closely resembling scrutiny that sometimes slides into meddling) from Lieutenant Colonel Harkleroad, the press release gains the feedback of “several other staff officers—Intelligence and Security, Plans and Operations, staff judge advocate, provost marshal, sometimes even the chaplain g[ets] a say-so,” before going to the chief of staff and, pending his approval, finally making its way to the commanding general. Unsurprisingly, “contradictory editing” is not uncommon, given the various hands and personalities through which the press release passes on its way out the door (61). The comic exaggeration here, as elsewhere, highlights the military’s tendency to focus with great intensity on minutiae while matters of great import remain unresolved, such as the United States’ loss of nearly nine billion dollars in Iraqi funds in January 2005 and the repeated failures of the U.S. military to meet recruitment targets.77

*Fobbit* uses the press release to manifest the manipulation of the war narrative by the American military. According to Geert Jacobs, “[W]hat makes press releases unique…is that
their only *raison d’etre* is to be retold: …they are meant to be ‘continued’ as accurately as possible, preferably even verbatim, in news reporting. Indeed, it could be argued that press releases just do not exist unless they are also, in some way or another, ‘picked up’ by journalists.”  

After a suicide bombing in the al-Karkh district of Baghdad, Harkleroad, who learns from headquarters that “‘MOI [the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior] is taking no action on this one,’” insists that he and Gooding “‘produce something about the attack and get it out there for the rest of the media’” (73).  

For the lieutenant colonel, and no doubt for his superiors as well, this press release serves as a singular opportunity for the Army to tell its version of the al-Karkh story—a version the Army intends to be taken up and repeated by the various major media outlets. The al-Karkh press release, however, only begins to take shape after the text first relates the incident in the third-person point of view from Gooding’s perspective; the event then gains further representation through dialogue, as Harkleroad and Gooding debate what should and should not be included in the release. These shifts in genre, paired with the continual rewriting of the press release—it goes through seven versions, *a* through *g*, of which the reader sees four in their entirety—demonstrate how “the war is edited for America.”

The event comes to light while Gooding is “in the midst of dealing with the assassination of the failed bomber who may or may not be from Switzerland”; Gooding then hears of the IED in al-Karkh and the probability of high U.S. casualties. As it turned out, only one U.S. soldier was killed—a hot chunk of scrap iron finding that two-inch sweet spot between the helmet and the collar of the flak vest and ripping away half of the kid’s neck, causing him to stumble and trip into a puddle of ignited gasoline. Three others had been wounded with the usual assortment of burns, partial amputations, and concussions. (59)
Rendered in the third person, the situation comes across in rather frank and somewhat graphic terms (e.g., “ripping away half of the kid’s neck”). By the time Gooding and Harkleroad perfect the final press release, however, they have written the stark goriness out of the original account; in fact, the American soldier’s death serves as a sanitized afterthought. In the final release, the focus shifts to the (supposedly) excellent job done by the American-trained Iraqi military, whom Gooding does not even mention in his initial third-person depiction, and the war on terror, war of “us vs. them,” and “war of liberation” narratives move to the fore.

After receiving the Sig Act report about the al-Karkh incident, Gooding begins with an “already written press release template he used whenever a division soldier died, which lately was at least twice a day” (65). He finishes the document quickly and hands it over to Harkleroad:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE June 6, 2005

RELEASE 20050606-04a

Soldier killed in al-Karkh suicide car bomb blast

BAGHDAD — A Task Force Baghdad soldier was killed when a suicide car bomber detonated his payload in an al-Karkh neighborhood around 11 a.m. on June 6.

Three Iraqi bystanders were also killed in the blast, which ripped through a shopping district, destroying a tea shop and fruit seller’s stall.

The soldier’s unit was assisting Iraqi security forces on a patrol of the area when it came under attack from terrorists. The soldier was evacuated to the 86th Combat Support Hospital where he later died of his injuries.

The name of the soldier is being held pending notification of next of kin. The incident is under investigation. (65–66)
Aside from a few stylistic flourishes reminiscent of Gooding’s journal entries (e.g., the phrase “detonated his payload” and the verb “ripped”), the press release offers a basic and straightforward depiction of the soldier’s death, including standard information about notification of next of kin and investigation of the incident. Harkleroad, however, finds the press release unsatisfying, and a revealing exchange of dialogue between the two PA staff members, illustrates how the military’s public relations motives influence the resulting war narrative. After reading the initial release, Harkleroad says,

> “Hm. Okay. Uh. Do we know for a fact it was a suicide car bomber?”

> “It was on the Sig Act, sir?”

> “But not confirmed by anyone on the ground?”

> “No, not that I’m aware, sir. I don’t think any of our men actually saw a crazed, wild-eyed terrorist sitting behind the steering wheel, if that’s what you mean.”

> …“Okay then,” Harkleroad said. “Let’s take out ‘when a suicide car bomber detonated his payload’ and replace it with ‘when a car bomb exploded.’ Make that change, then print it out for me to see.”

[Gooding makes the requested changes]…


> “Aw, shit.”

> “That’s okay because I’ve got another change. Let’s take out the part about the shopping district and the fruit and tea. It tends toward humanization of the Local Nationals—you know, it blurs the line of our neutrality here. Looks like we’re sensationalizing the deaths of these three poor Iraqis.”

> …“On second thought…”
“Yes, sir?”

“Let’s take out all reference to the dead Iraqis. We’ll let the Ministry of the Interior make that announcement. Besides, I’m a little reluctant to play up the fact that only one of our guys was killed, versus three on the home team. Collateral deaths are always a tricky thing, Sergeant Gooding.”

“Yes, sir, they are.”

…“It sort of plays into the ‘if you weren’t here, this never would have happened’ mentality,” Harkleroad said. “Let’s not draw attention to the Local National deaths if we don’t have to.”

[Gooding makes additional changes]…

…“Hm. Okay. But…ehhh…I don’t know. I think we need to put the reference to multinational forces after the Iraqi security forces. Right now it looks like we’re trying to hog the spotlight from our Iraqi friends.”

“Ooo-kay, sir.”

…“What do you think about calling the ISF heroic?” (66–68)

The press release’s diction, structure, and both inclusion and exclusion of information all come under fire from Harkleroad, who, in telling the story of the al-Karkh attack, prioritizes the Army’s image over any allegiance to so-called fact or the need to relay information in a timely manner.

As opposed to outright fabrications, several of Harkleroad’s suggested changes are lies by omission. He excludes, for example, the death of three Iraqi bystanders (Local Nationals), the inclusion of which would cast the U.S. military in an unflattering light, in the eyes of both the
Iraqi populace and the American people. Discussing the applicability of just war theory to contemporary conflicts such as the Iraq War, Iraqi-born philosopher Bassam Romaya asserts,

Any consideration of new wars must demand an increased moral awareness of the human toll on civilians in war, who are continually displaced, injured, maimed, disfigured, or easily killed in new wars. Since new wars generate much higher casualty rates for civilian populations than for military personnel, a credible assessment of the moral dimensions of new wars must account for the distressing problem of risk transfer, introduced by new-war environments that have continually worked to shift the risk of injury and death to civilians while rendering traditional combatants virtually immune from war violence and, at times, war death.82

Recognizing the “tricky” nature of collateral civilian deaths (67), Harkleroad attempts to sidestep any assessment of what Romaya refers to as the “moral dimensions” of contemporary war by eliminating discussion of these deaths altogether. Although not “immune” to the results of the suicide bombing, the American forces suffer death in a 1:3 ratio compared to the Iraqi civilians; this proportion highlights just how much Iraq stands to lose in the face of the United States’ so-called magnanimous military intervention. In another sleight of hand, Harkleroad attempts to diffuse the seriousness of the offense. A “suicide car bomber [who] detonated his payload” possesses much more agency and power than does a “‘car bomb’” that appears to have “‘exploded’” almost by happenstance, and, by utilizing the latter phraseology, Harkleroad undermines some of that power (65, 66). While much of the lieutenant colonel’s linguistic wrangling walks the fine line of lying, his use of the word heroic to describe the Iraqi forces leans pretty heavily toward overt deception. Though the reader lacks access to the Sig Act report describing the incident, Gooding’s third-person description altogether excludes mention of the
Iraqi forces and his original press release describes them only as “on a patrol” (66). In this instance Harkleroad appears to be inventing things, casting the ISF in a positive light, ultimately, because he desires and has the ability to do so. Here, narrative, and specifically war narrative, is revealed as an instrument of the powerful.

The power that adheres to the maker of narratives becomes quite clear as *Fobbit* again shifts genres and renders the outcome of Harkleroad and Gooding’s dialogue in the form of a revised press release:

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**June 6, 2005**

**RELEASE 20050606-04e**

**Iraqi Security Forces attacked in al-Karkh**

**BAGHDAD** — Heroic Iraqi security forces with minimal assistance from Task Force Baghdad soldiers, were patrolling al-Karkh around 11 a.m. on June 6 when they came under attack from terrorists.

One U.S. soldier was killed when a car bomb exploded in the neighborhood.

The soldier was evacuated to the 86th Combat Support Hospital where he later died of his injuries.

The name of the soldier is being held pending notification of next of kin. The incident is under investigation. (69)

With press release e, the conversation becomes entextualized, which Joseph Sung-Yul Park and Mary Bucholtz describe as “the process by which circulable texts are produced by extracting discourse from its original context”83 (discourse, here, refers to speech or spoken language). Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs write of entextualization, “In simple terms, though it is
far from simple, it is the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit—a text—that can be lifted out of its interactional setting. A text, then, from this vantage point, is discourse rendered decontextualizable.”  When Harkleroad’s verbal directives to Gooding are manifested in written form via the revised press release—a document that, at its very core, is intended to be circulated and reproduced—the original discourse has been extracted from its initial setting and made into a text, and a very powerful one at that, for, as Park and Bucholtz assert, entextualization is a “central mechanism for the authorization and legitimation of institutions”—it “is a fundamental process of power and authority.” The power of the entextualized dialogue in the form of press release e inheres in the fact of its existence outside the initial context in which Harkleroad shaped and altered press release a’s ideas and language: his motives for excluding the tea shop and fruit stall, for instance, or for mentioning the Iraqi soldiers before the American soldiers remain hidden—and therefore nonexistent—to the press release’s imaginary readers. The resulting text of the press release bears the stamp and authority of the highly powerful U.S. Army and reveals none of the traces of its authors’ motives, biases, etc. Harkleroad the narrative-maker disappears into an unseen and unconceived-of background; the authority for the entextualized product belongs to the institution, to the Army itself.

Although the chief of staff approves version e, CNN runs a report about the attack before the PA team issues its release, and Harkleroad insists he and Gooding “start over with a new angle” (71). The final release, version g, which includes “flourishes” from Gooding and what Harkleroad characterizes as “a few adjectives here and there,” stands in sharp contrast to the initial third-person narration (72, 73):
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 6, 2005

RELEASE 20050606-04g

Brave Iraqi Security Forces repel heinous al-Karkh attack

BAGHDAD—Dozens of brave Iraqi security forces put months of coalition-backed training to the test today as they responded with lightning-like speed and efficiency to an unwarranted terrorist attack in an al-Karkh neighborhood around 11 a.m.

Iraqi police and Baghdad emergency response teams were first on the scene after an explosion went off near an Iraqi Army patrol combing houses in the area and looking for caches of weapons and insurgent propaganda material in an ongoing effort to defeat the enemies of democracy in the region. The daring Iraqi security forces immediately cordoned off the area to ensure no Iraqi citizens were killed or injured by potential subsequent blasts.

One U.S. soldier was killed in the attack. The name of the soldier is being held pending notification of next of kin. The incident is under investigation.

This press release reduces the American soldier, whose death accounts for roughly two-thirds of the original third-person depiction, to two stock sentences in the final paragraph, or less than one-sixth of the document’s length. While Harkleroad spices up the prose of the other two paragraphs with more than half a dozen adjectives, he attributes none to the dead soldier. The title and each of the first three sentences (two of which run more than thirty-five words in length) emphasize the Iraqi forces, who serve as the subjects of the sentences and are characterized as courageous and competent. In the final version, Harkleroad goes a step beyond lying by
omission; not only does he exclude mention of the three Local Nationals killed by the IED’s explosion, but he also adds in a sentence about the Iraqi forces’ efforts to ensure that no secondary explosions kill or injure Iraqi citizens, a move that encourages the notion that no harm has come to any bystanders when, in fact, three died in the initial attack.

Despite the small size of the final press release, three dominant official-media narratives emerge in its first three sentences, underscoring the crucial role and power of framing within media contexts. The first sentence immediately establishes the war on terror narrative, calling the event an “unwarranted terrorist attack.” The narrative of the Iraq War as a war of us vs. them also emerges at the outset with mention of “coalition-backed training,” which attempts to broaden the “us” beyond a purely American group while eliding the fact that most of the members of the so-called “coalition of the willing” who supported the invasion of Iraq did so without lending military support and in return for foreign aid. The phrase “insurgent propaganda” calls to mind a “them” actively opposing everything “we” believe in, and “an ongoing effort to defeat the enemies of democracy in the region” implies a tyrannical enemy—other who hates political freedom, which is, the narrative implies, the American birth-right. This reference to democracy likewise bolsters the war of liberation narrative, as it supports the notion that the American military has come to Iraq in order to free the country’s people from an oppressive ruler and guide the nation into the glories of democratic government. That the morning’s actions occurred with “lightning-like speed and efficiency” further strengthens the mission of the United States in helping the Iraqis: the U.S. efforts obviously have the support of the Iraqi security forces and are paying dividends, as the morning’s events demonstrate that Iraqi forces are up to the task before them. In a matter of three sentences, press release g turns the story of a suicide car bomb and the death of four individuals on its head, framing the incident so
that minimum damage occurs to the American military—both literally and figuratively—and the Iraqis come out not dead but shining.

In manipulating the press release to advance highly positive official narratives of the war, *Fobbit* continues a trend begun in Vietnam with military press briefings, known by journalists as the Five O’Clock Follies. In *Dispatches* (1977), Michael Herr, who spent eighteen months from 1967–69 in-country as a correspondent for *Esquire*, describes these daily briefings as “an Orwellian grope through the day’s events as seen by the Mission.”90 With regard to the months-long siege of Marines at Khe Sanh, for example, American officers described “heavy casualties” as “light,” “routs and ambushes” conducted by the Vietnamese as “temporary tactical ploys,” and cold, rainy weather “as good or even excellent.”91 Because Herr (like numerous other reporters) frequently went into the field and passed time with grunts, he recognized the disjunction between the war as experienced by the men on the ground and as represented by American commanders. All manner of information about the war got distorted, including enemy body counts and the number of American casualties,92 as the military relied on these official briefings to construct for the American public a particular view of a war that was not proceeding well. As Abrams’s novel demonstrates, a similar approach informed U.S. information policy in Iraq, where public affairs officers take nearly any liberty with the objective, material conditions of a given event en route to shaping a military friendly story.

*Fobbit’s* genre play encourages a closer look at the dominant narratives of the Iraq War that have proliferated throughout American culture, for when glimmers of the war against terror, us vs. them, and the war of liberation appear in the final press release, they are a far cry from a soldier who stumbles into ignited gasoline after flak from an exploded IED slices his neck in half. Where dumb or bad luck and mean-spiritedness initially triumphed, bravery and the fight
for democracy win the day. The novel’s genre-shifting also highlights the malleability of a seemingly fixed concept such as death: in the military-media universe, death becomes a function of documentation, another aspect (among so many others) of military bureaucracy, an element of the story to be fitted in when—and only when—certain rules and regulations are met. Eventually Harkleroad finishes the final press release, “finally hit[s] the SEND button,” and declares “‘another minor victory for the name of truth and democracy’” (74), but the text hints at all that has been lost in the process.

Conclusion

President Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” speech notwithstanding, the Iraq War hardly reads like a success for the American military. In any case, Romaya asserts that “the old-war concept of ‘victory’” may have been “effectively dissolved” in contemporary war, “especially…in cases where states are engaged with nonstate or nonnation entities, a factor that increasingly distinguishes so-called postmodern wars from prior wars.” According to Romaya, “Unrestrained chaos is a better way to understand new wars” such as those fought by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan: “chaos,” he says, “may be the only victor.” But chaos has neither a particularly comforting ring to it nor an appealing one; it does not draw voters to the polls or push viewers toward their televisions. A war story with chaos defining its narrative structure stands little chance of making it past the slush pile. So as bodies continue to pile up (American, Iraqi, and otherwise) in the vicinity of Forward Operating Base Triumph, Fobbit’s press releases go out of their way to bring order to the Baghdad districts of Mansour and Khadhimiya, to the eastern Iraqi province of Diyala, to all those sandy places where the chaos of contemporary war reigns. A U.S. military public affairs team sits on-call at Saddam’s former
palace, ready and waiting to revise the grim results of bomb blasts and blood baths into something more decent and tasteful, something a little more palatable and a little less blunt. These press releases obscure the occurrence of death, making for the American public stories that shape the war into battles against evil terrorists and missions to help newly freed, democracy-loving Iraqis.

In the end *Fobbit* highlights that the stories about the Iraq War are, indeed, stories—narratives that have been constructed by human beings, people with motives and agendas, subjectivities and personalities, foibles and so on. The novel stresses that the stories of war the U.S. military is most fond of telling, and the ones the press are most fond of sharing, are those in which war does not look all that much like itself. Indeed, Abrams’s text makes clear that, while these tidier, kinder, and gentler stories of war proliferate throughout American culture, chaos will continue to write its messy, disturbing, sometimes nonsensical and incomprehensible stories in the lived experiences of U.S. soldiers, Iraqis, and all of the many others caught up in the whirlwind of war.

Notes

5 David Abrams, *Fobbit* (New York: Black Cat, 2012), 2. Hereafter, references to the novel will be cited parenthetically in text. All textual errors (such as missing spaces between words in emails) are original to the text.
6 Abrams served as a journalist in the Army for twenty years before retiring in 2008. He deployed to Iraq in 2005.
7 A third character, Captain Abe Shrinkle, becomes a Fobbit partway through the novel when he is stripped of his command and given charge of the base’s gym.
9 Chapters are named for the character from whose point of view they are told; there are, however, brief shifts into the viewpoints of minor characters such as Specialist Carnicle, from whose p.o.v. Abrams renders the story for about a page within Gooding’s second chapter (see *Fobbit*, 45–46).
Included in this narrative is the idea that Saddam Hussein possessed, or was in the process of acquiring the technology for, WMDs.


Reviewers David Annand claims, “…Abrams is right to lampoon…this absurd obsession,” that is, the obsession with who will be the two thousandth casualty. I think, however, he is incorrect in his assertion that “[w]hich of the characters is going to be reduced to this statistic drives the narrative of the book.” Abrams makes no mention of the two-thousandth casualty until page 321 of a 369-page narrative (more than 85% of the way through), making it difficult to argue that this idea drives the story. “*Fobbit* by David Abrams: Review,” review of *Fobbit*, by David Abrams, *Telegraph* (UK), April 4, 2013, accessed February 12, 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/fictionreviews/9957355/Fobbit-by-David-Abrams-review.html.


Ibid., 168–69.

Satires are frequently categorized as either Horatian or Juvenalian, depending on the level of playfulness (or not) characterizing their critiques. Ejner J. Jensen, however, asserts that “it seems unnecessary to insist on the absoluteness of such a division; in fact most satirists range over the spectrum from ‘Horatian’ to ‘Juvenalian’ in their attitudes toward their subjects, their language, their style, and their tone.” *Fobbit*, I argue, offers an example of such ranging across the spectrum. “Verse Satire in the English Renaissance,” in *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*, ed. Reuben Quintero (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 105.

In an earlier mishap, Shrinkle fails to act at Intersection Quillpen, where a suicide bomber has rammed his car into an American tank carrying U.S. soldiers; then Shrinkle shoots and kills a mentally handicapped Local National wearing a parka, jester’s cap, and snow pants, after mistakenly assuming that the boy has on a suicide vest.


Indeed, in a recently leaked March 28, 2002 memo to President Bush, then-Secretary of Defense Colin Powell writes, “Blair continues to stand by you and the U.S. as we move forward on the war on terrorism and on Iraq. He will present to you the strategic, tactical and public affairs lines that he believes will strengthen public support for our common cause,” and “On Iraq, Blair will be with us should military operations be necessary.” Colin L. Powell, “Memorandum for the President: Your Meeting with United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair, April 5–7, 2002 at Crawford,” *U.S. Department of State*, March 28, 2002, accessed February 11, 2016, https://foia.state.gov/Search/results.aspx?searchText=*&beginDate=&endDate=&publishedBeginDate=&publishedEndDate=&caseNumber=F-2012-33239. These statements came nearly a full year before the invasion of Iraq and while Blair publicly proclaimed that he was in search of a diplomatic solution to problems with Iraq. Glen Owen and William Lowther, “Smoking Gun Emails Reveal Blair’s ‘Deal in Blood’ with George Bush over Iraq War was Forged a Year Before the Invasion Had Even Started,” *DailyMail.com*, October 17, 2015, accessed February 11, 2016, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3277402/Smoking-gun-emails-reveal-Blair-s-deal-blood-George-Bush-Iraq-war-forged-YEAR-invasion-started.html.

Quoted in Kaplan, “Vietnamization.”


*Ibid.* Christenson criticizes the other side of the spectrum as well: “The carping is as bad from the left, which has found fault with the national media for not challenging the administration during the run-up to the war and demands ever more critical coverage of the occupation. These folks make essentially the same supposition as those on the right: that the media could find more bad news stories if they just did their jobs.”

In fact, Harkeroad cannot help but speak of the situation in the language of public relations when he tells Belcher, “If we don’t deny this body was ours, then we’ll be spinning until we’re dizzy, sir” (338).


Anthony R. DiMaggio, *Mass Media, Mass Propaganda: Examining American News in the War on Terror* (New York: Lexington Books, 2008), 78. Despite close contact with the troops on the ground and the resulting access to information this contact provided, embedded journalists nevertheless infrequently produced scathing or overly revealing reports of the American effort. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see ch 1, pp. 53–54


*Billy Lynn* also utilizes unconventional narrative structures—such as a Jumbotron announcement—to draw attention to the construction of the war narrative; see chapter 2.


The narrator notes the coming of the initial diary entry, saying, “Not many days and three U.S. KIAs later, the water was carried in plastic bags, as if they’d just come from a pet store with a few goldfish.” That detail—so poignant and odd and particular—has the feel of something remembered rather than invented.” “Fobbit by David Abrams—Review.”

At the same time, these moves affirm Abrams’s authenticity vis-à-vis the war narrative.

Bashbanes, “Book Review.”


52 Hiro, After Empire, 260.

53 Sieminski, “The Art of Naming Operations.”

54 Ibid.


56 It also calls to mind the printed cards issued to soldiers in Vietnam; these cards listed do’s and don’t’s for interacting with the local population.


58 It hardly seems coincidental that Abrams names the major “Lesser.”

59 In fact, Lesser never uses the word move in his original email.

60 When Gunderson then admonishes the others to “Please train your minds and tongues accordingly” (162), one cannot help but hear an echo of the effort to “win the hearts and minds” of the Iraqi people (or, with the war in east Asia, the South Vietnamese people).

61 Lesser also makes an analogy to the American Revolution, specifically to the new government in Philadelphia in 1776, but he sees a positive connection between the young American state and the new Iraqi democracy, rather than the negative connection Gunderson draws between the word insurgent, American rebels of the Revolution, and modern-day purveyors of violence in Iraq.

62 DiMaggio, Mass Media, Mass Propaganda, 78.

63 Ibid.

64 Gunderson clearly does not adhere to the adage that one ought not use a form of the word in the definition of that word. Even so, his definition bears some resemblance to the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of terrorist: “A person who uses violent and intimidating methods in the pursuit of political aims; esp. a member of a clandestine or expatriate organization aiming to coerce an established government by acts of violence against it or its subjects.” Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “terrorist,” accessed November 11, 2015, www.oed.com.

65 Amy Zalman and Jonathan Clarke, “The Global War on Terror: A Narrative in Need of a Rewrite,” Ethics and International Affairs 23, no. 2 (Summer 2009), accessed November 16, 2015, http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/journal/23_2/essays/002. Some individuals and institutions refer to the concept as the Global War on “Terrorism,” while others utilize the shorter Global War on “Terror.” In this project I use the latter for the sake of ease and consistency.


67 Zalman and Clarke, “The Global War on Terror.”

68 Entman, “Framing,” 55.
Ibid. 167.
74 Ty Hawkins, Reading Vietnam Amid the War on Terror (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 38.
76 One cannot help but think of Catch-22 (1961) here, and of course the comparisons between Abrams’s book and Heller’s classic World War II satire have been numerous. The specific incidents that come to mind involve the dead man in Yossarian’s tent (Officer Mudd), who dies in a plane crash before checking in at squadron headquarters and, therefore, does not technically exist in the squadron’s records, and Doc Daneeka, who “dies” in McWatt’s plane by virtue of being on the flight manifest, despite his remaining alive and well in the bodily sense.
79 Though the descriptions of the events at times appear to overlap, this al-Karkh incident seems to be distinct from the one near the water treatment facility in which SSG Harding was killed, given that the manner in which this soldier dies is entirely different from that in which Harding dies. Al-Karkh may refer to the western half of Baghdad or to one of the nine administrative districts of the city; the text does not specify.
80 Busch, “Book Review.”
81 The novel does not supply this Sig Act for the reader.
85 The novel’s dialogue is, of course, written language; it is, however, meant to represent spoken language, and so I refer to theoretical ideas about spoken language.
86 Park and Bucholtz, “Introduction,” 487 and 486.
87 I have excluded “U.S.” of course, as well as all other proper adjectives. With those included, more than a dozen appear in the first two paragraphs.
88 For a detailed discussion of these narratives, see chapter 1.
89 During the early days of the war, the coalition included thirty-eight countries. In addition to the U.S., only three, however, provided significant military assistance during the combat phase—the United Kingdom, Australia, and Poland—and although a number of other states (e.g., South Korea, Georgia, Italy) committed troops during the occupation phase, most of these nations withdrew their forces several years into the conflict. Lionel Beehner, “The ‘Coalition of the Willing,’” Council on Foreign Relations, February 22, 2007, accessed February 22, 2017, http://www.cfr.org/iraq/coalition-willing/p9340#p8. Because countries willing to offer verbal support for the effort were commonly granted foreign aid by the Bush administration, critics dubbed this group the “coalition of the billing.” See Laura McClure, “Coalition of the Billing—or Unwilling,” Salon, March 12, 2003, accessed February 22, 2017, http://www.salon.com/2003/03/12/foreign_aid/.
91 Ibid., 143
93 Romaya, A Philosophical Analysis, 111. Romaya distinguishes the popular term postmodern war from postmodernism by noting, “Though the exclusivist, antuniuniversalist nature of new wars might initially invite some commonality with postmodern thought, new-war ideological objectives do not easily fit the pluralistic embrace of postmodernism, since new-war actors, while antiuniuniversalist to a degree, are neither anti-ideological nor pluralistic” (107).
94 Ibid.
[If you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book.

—Tim O’Brien

There’s a kind of emptiness inside me that tells me that I’ve still got something coming. It’s not a pension that I’m looking for. What I paid out wasn’t money; it was part of myself. I want to be paid back in kind, in something human.

—Anonymous Veteran

Though riddled with the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and firefights that notoriously characterized the Iraq War, the stories of Phil Klay’s National Book Award-winning Redeployment (2014) feature only one central character who suffers from the war’s devastating physical wounds. In “War Stories,” Jenks, a former Marine Corps engineer, shares his memories of the IED blast that left him with lasting pain and destroyed his looks. Despite fifty-four surgeries, when he smiles, “[t]he left side of his face is twisted up, the wrinkled skin over the cheeks bunched and his thin-lipped slit of a mouth straining toward where his ear should be. The right side stays still, but that’s standard for him, given the nerve damage.” According to Sarah, the woman to whom Jenks tells his story, “IEDs cause the signature wounds of this war,” by which she means burns and traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) (“War Stories” 222). No doubt, the number of these wounds is staggering: the Department of Defense and the Defense and Veteran’s Brain Injury Center estimate that more than 20% of the injuries from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan take the form of TBIs, and, as of 2006, 368 burn casualties had been recorded in Iraq. Aside from “War Stories,” however, the majority of the pieces in Klay’s collection of Iraq War tales focus on a different sort of injury as the primary result of the conflict. The soldiers,
Marines, and veterans in these stories suffer damage that goes largely unseen by those around them—damage not to their bodily selves but to their moral selves, what theorists call “moral injury.”

Nearly all of Klay’s dozen stories include at least one character contending with some form of moral injury, which, according to Brett Litz et al., occurs as a result of someone “perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.” Many of the characters are still-deployed soldiers or Marines, such as the narrator of “Ten Kliks South,” who is plagued by the faceless group of insurgents on which his unit drops ammunition from miles away, or Timhead in “After Action Report,” who agonizes over his killing of an Iraqi teen who was shooting at him and his fellow Marines after an IED blast. “Prayer in the Furnace,” another story set in Iraq, chronicles the various moral quandaries of a chaplain and the men to whom he ministers, one of whom participated in provoking sniper fire that killed his friend, while “OIF” relates the tale of a Marine non-commissioned officer (NCO) who cannot forgive himself for the death of his subordinate. Once back in the U.S., Klay’s characters hardly fare better. The law student veteran narrator of “Unless It’s a Sucking Chest Wound,” for example, cannot forestall tears when talking about the injured children he saw in Iraq, and in the title story the narrator returns home haunted by the stray dogs he shot on deployment.

The concept of moral injury offers a particularly productive way for thinking about Iraq War narratives such as the stories in Klay’s collection, by refuting the strict dichotomies that permeate so much post-9/11 discourse and animate conventional thinking about the war. Jonathan Shay sees moral injury beginning in “‘a betrayal of what’s right by someone who holds legitimate authority in a high-stakes situation.’” Such betrayal may occur “on either a personal
or an organizational level”—in the military situation, the betrayal may occur at the level, for instance, of immediate command or within the uppermost echelons. It may also result from one’s own actions. Within Iraq War discourse, the commonly formulated rhetorical binaries of hero vs. villain and victim vs. perpetrator, which placed the United States and her agents (e.g., soldiers) always in the position of virtue, demanded that individuals fill a strictly black-or-white role. Under the theory of moral injury, however, an individual is plagued by the bad deeds s/he has done (or the good deeds s/he has failed to do) precisely because s/he possesses some measure of decency; good and bad coexist within the same person, who can therefore be neither purely a hero/victim nor purely a villain/perpetrator, and is always both. Moral injury therefore challenges Iraq War narratives of good vs. evil that rely on simplistic binary categorization.

In engaging the problem of moral injury, Redeployment looks beyond individual soldiers, however, or even the U.S. military bureaucracy that has committed moral missteps, questioning the role and responsibility of the larger society to which the soldier belongs. Critic Sam Sacks, though, does not register this argument; he charges the book with “self-involvement,” a label he attributes to the growing body of veteran-authored fiction about the recent U.S. wars, including Michael Pitre’s Fives and Twenty-Fives, Kevin Powers’s The Yellow Birds, and the stories of the Fire and Forget anthology edited by Roy Scranton and Matt Gallagher. According to Sacks, “[T]he soldier’s consciousness is the field of battle” in contemporary U.S. war fiction, which “is in danger of settling into the patterns of complacency that smoothed the path to the Terror Wars in the first place.” Sacks laments the attention paid by Klay (and others) to “the singular and the personal.” While Redeployment concentrates on “individual” American “soldiers who can’t comprehend what they’ve experienced,” however, these so-called “confined viewpoints” of American military-affiliated men nevertheless signal a larger rift in American society and serve
as a springboard to the collection’s greater project. As the stories explore specific, palpable moments during the fighting and after—moments when soldiers are scared or hateful or ashamed, when American civilians respond to veterans with uncertainty or superficial gratitude, and when vets react in anger, grief, or striking numbness—a pervasive sense of disconnection surfaces between the American soldier and the nation for which he fought.

In charting the grave wounds of the Iraq War, *Redeployment* tells a story defined not only by the tension inherent in this disconnection but also by the possibility that inheres in connection. “No civilian can assume the moral burdens felt at a gut level by participants in war,” Klay writes in an essay for the Brookings Institute, “but all can show an equal commitment to their country, an equal assumption of the obligations inherent in citizenship, and an equal bias for action.” In this commitment—its a form of connection—Klay’s text finds the opportunity for healing, both for the wounded soldier and wounded nation. At the structural level, the collection moves continuously between the war and the home front, revealing the impossibility of extricating the two experiences from one another and underscoring civilians’ implication in the moral injuries of the war. In “OIF,” obsessive military jargon works at first to distance civilian from soldier but ultimately draws them together, as empathy and shared cultural experience transcend the brute realities of war and offer a path toward healing. A number of the stories employ techniques of metafiction to illustrate the mediation of Iraq War discourse and demonstrate the complicity of all members of society in perpetuating simplistic and damaging war narratives. Echoes of Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* resound in the collection’s metafictional meditations on truth, signaling reverberations from the Vietnam War and its legacy; at the same time, however, differences in the relationships between citizen and soldier in the two collections underscore the distinct experiences of the returning soldier and the American societies to which s/he returned.
Finally, *Redeployment* employs secondary characters to undermine the injurious modes of 
Othering and binary thinking that animate so much Iraq War discourse, demonstrating the 
similarities that unite seemingly unreconcilable groups. Ultimately, *Redeployment* insists that in 
order to heal from war, citizen and soldier must join together to move beyond simplistic 
conceptions of good vs. evil and guilt vs. innocence to tell a painful story of the Iraq War for 
which all Americans share the burden.

**The Shape of a Nationwide Injury: Narrative Structure**

Commenting on the even division of war stories and what one interviewer calls 
“aftermath” stories in *Redeployment*, Klay notes, “One of the things that really stands out about 
the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is the degree of disconnect between the military and civilian 
America. That seems to play out most during the homecoming experience.” Indeed, Peter D. 
Feaver, Richard H. Kohn, and Lindsay P. Cohn describe a historical American “concern…that a 
‘gap’ in values or attitudes between people in uniform and civilian society may…become so 
wide that it threatens the effectiveness of the armed forces and civil-military cooperation.”

Throughout much of America’s past, this concern often focused on the dangers inherent in 
maintaining a large standing army in peacetime, but differences between the groups also 
emerged during the nation’s various armed conflicts. A number of characteristics specific to the 
contemporary era, however, have contributed to a gaping military/civilian divide far surpassing 
any that existed during the country’s earlier wars or times of peace.

Perhaps the most obvious reason for this separation is the small percentage of the 
population serving in today’s armed forces. As of 2010, less than .05% of the American people 
were on active duty in the U.S. military, a number that pales in comparison to the almost 3% of
Americans who served during Vietnam and the close to 10% in World War II. According to James Fallows, “[M]any American families had at least one member in uniform” during “the decade after World War II,” whereas in the contemporary era, “the American military is exotic territory to most of the American public.” Not only did a remarkably small number of individuals experience the hardships and ugliness of the Iraq War firsthand, but a similarly small number—when compared with previous U.S. wars—of family members, friends, neighbors, etc., were significantly impacted by having a loved one deploy and then return home, resulting in a considerable disparity of experience between the overwhelming majority of the American population and those in or close to military families.

The lack of a national draft has altered the demographic make-up of the military, and the military has also become increasingly isolated from the civilian world. Following the nation’s withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973, Selective Service abolished the draft, and the United States shifted to an all-volunteer force. In the ensuing decades, the military increasingly came to represent what various commentators call—more or less positively—a warrior caste. Post-9/11, military service has largely become, in the words of Amy Shafer, daughter of a U.S. Air Force pilot, “a family affair”: 80% of new recruits in 2016 report at least one family member (parent, sibling, grandparent, aunt/uncle, or cousin) who has served. Klay, for example, begins *Redeployment* with the epigraph, “For my mother and father, who had three sons join the military in a time of war.” Fallows has shown that America’s “class war” extended to its fighting force in Vietnam, which was drawn primarily from the poor and working classes; even so, the selection of these service members from the rank and file of American communities—and their reintegration into these communities after their year overseas—helped to ensure that a larger portion of the nation’s overall population shared in the military experience. In the current era,
by contrast, the military has become increasingly isolated from the majority of the U.S. populace. Base closings have consolidated more service members into specific geographic areas,22 with nearly half of those individuals on active-duty concentrated in California and four southern states, and spacious rural settings are vastly preferred to high-population urban centers.23 Calling American military bases “the nation’s most exclusive gated communities,” former Army officer Phillip Carter and retired Lt. Gen. David Barno describe “a remarkably self-contained world” in which military families can grocery shop, go to the doctor, play sports, and more—all without ever seeing a civilian. According to these Iraq War veterans, “Roughly a third of military families live on bases, with many more living just outside the wire in military enclaves,” figures that underscore how insular the U.S. military community has become. Negative consequences result for both soldier and civilian: veterans experience “culture shock” when returned to the civilian world, while civilians pursue their days with little to no awareness of the service members orbiting in the (often very far off) periphery.24 A 2011 PEW study reports that 44% of contemporary-era veterans have difficulty reintegrating into society after their time in the service, a marked increase from the 25% of veterans who had reintegration difficulties after earlier U.S. conflicts.25 Moreover, 84% of post-9/11 veterans believe the public does not understand them or the problems they face, and 71% of civilians agree.26

Finally, the social aspects of the contemporary wartime climate have created a deep division and feelings of tension between those who served and those who did not. Earlier U.S. wars required various sacrifices of not only the men and women in uniform but also those who remained at home. In contrast, as Rick Hampson notes, with the Iraq War, “…Americans don’t have to pay higher taxes, burn less gas or eat less sugar….There’s nothing like the air raid drills of the Cold War.”27 While service members and their families endure months and often years of
hardship, civilians continue their normal lives generally uninterrupted. The tendency of the post-9/11 soldier to deploy overseas for multiple tours of duty has only intensified the situation. During Vietnam, most soldiers served a single, year-long tour and then returned home.28 According to the Committee on the Assessment of the Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and Their Families, 43% of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom soldiers deployed more than once, with 40% of that number deploying three times or more.29 Thus the same individuals—the same soldiers, military spouses, military children, etc.—experienced the difficulties and privations of war over and over again, while around them the country carried on much the same as it would had a war not been raging.

Between its first and last stories, *Redeployment* continually shifts between Iraq and the U.S., structurally enacting the divisions that perpetuate the war’s raging wounds. Klay engages the tension inherent in this division between soldier and citizen, but *Redeployment* neither softens the implications nor resigns itself to the fate of a hopeless divide. Instead Klay uses structure not only to explore the rifts and wounds the war has wrought in individuals and American society but also to comment on civilians’ complicity in the war. The book begins with a homecoming story and then moves to “Frago,” set in Iraq, and “After Action Report,” which takes place in and outside of Fallujah; in the next piece, “Bodies,” the present action occurs near Las Vegas, while the narrator is on leave. “OIF” takes place in Iraq, as does “Money as a Weapons System,” which is set at Camp Taji. Of the remaining half dozen stories, two occur in the war zone (“Prayer in the Furnace,” the ninth story, and “Ten Kliks South,” the final story), while the others are variously set in a strip club near Camp Lejeune, at Amherst College, and in bars in New York City. With this back-and-forth movement, *Redeployment* refuses a neat progression of war-to-homecoming stories or a simple war/home front split that separates the in-
war stories from the out-of war/after-war stories and would allow for linear sense-making and the simple division of one world—the soldier’s—from another—the veteran’s. The collection repeatedly insists on the intertwined, inextricable nature of the war and the home front experiences, even as it points to the distinctions between soldier/veteran and civilian, whose life proceeds largely untouched by the stains of war. Moreover, as the civilian is ever-entangled with the soldier, this narrative structure highlights the complicity of the American people in the commission of the war. No matter how far removed they are from the daily realities and stresses of combat, civilians remain bound up with the soldiers’ experience.

Increasingly, this experience has come to be dominated by moral injury. According to Litz et al,

the current wars may be creating an additional risk for exposure to morally questionable or ethically ambiguous situations. Many service members may mistakenly take the life of a civilian they believed to be an insurgent, be directly responsible for the death of enemy combatants, unexpectedly see dead bodies or human remains, or see ill/wounded women and children who [sic] they are unable to help.30

While moral injury and the much more frequently discussed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) share a number of traits in common, and many active duty and returning soldiers suffer from both problems, the two are distinct phenomena. Brett Litz and Shira Manguen characterize PTSD as “a mental problem that requires a diagnosis, [whereas] moral injury is a dimensional problem.”31 In instances of moral injury, the sufferer’s transgression serves as a central component, but this transgression is not required for PTSD, which often occurs as a result of harm caused by someone else.32 Like PTSD, moral injury frequently causes avoidance and emotional numbing in sufferers, and those enduring moral injury may re-experience the injurious
event in the form of intrusive dreams and memories. Guilt and shame surface as the phenomenon’s most salient features but are typically absent in PTSD. The emotional responses of shame and guilt result from the dissonance produced when an individual recognizes that his/her (in)action severely deviates from “moral and ethical expectations that are rooted in religious or spiritual beliefs, or culture-based, organizational, and group-based rules about fairness, the value of life, and so forth.” Litz et al assert that shame, as opposed to guilt—which is context-specific and may prompt a change in behavior—is the more central and detrimental consequence of moral injury. Shame “stems from global self-attributions” such as “I am an evil terrible person” or “I am unforgivable,” and it can infect myriad aspects of the sufferer’s life.

Although no single “cure” exists, psychologists agree that healing must occur in community. When American soldiers return home from war, they face a populace who has “‘been at the mall’” and relies on pat expressions of gratitude (e.g., “Thank you for your service”) in its interactions with veterans. Such expressions may only serve to alienate already suffering vets, who view civilians’ responses as insincere and hollow since the war has had little to no effect on civilian life. Moreover, Shay asserts that American “society lacks any real understanding of what’s needed for purification after battle,” the “rituals,…liturgies…narratives,…artworks.” According to Shay, society cannot simply say, “You, Mr. Veteran, you need to clean yourself up”; rather “we all need to clean ourselves up after war[,]…we need to purify as a community.” This understanding of the purification process posits as central the role of the civilian, who must actively engage with veterans and soldiers in the processing of and healing from war. Nancy Sherman’s notion of civilians bearing a “shared moral responsibility” for the costs of war takes Shay’s concept a step further. In Sherman’s formulation, civilians must look both backward and forward in an effort to accept greater responsibility for their “indirect and
direct support” of a war. Such a way of viewing war spreads a conflict’s moral burdens across all members of a society, rather than placing the entire onus on the individual soldiers/actors and decision- and policy-makers/directors who actively participate in the commission of hostilities.

Within the book’s larger organization, the first and last stories provide a structure that signals the moral isolation of the veteran and the need for reincorporating him and his difficult experiences into an American culture from which he has been alienated. As Brian Castner notes, “…Klay starts with the shooting of dogs and ends the book with the burying of Americans.” Though both grievous experiences in their own way, these deceptively simple bookends serve as powerful elements in the book’s project of investigating how U.S. veterans and their society can begin the difficult work of repairing the damage wrought by nearly a decade of war.

Klay’s collection begins with a revelation that immediately presents the veteran narrator’s moral injury and situates him outside the bounds of normal Western society and as part of a subgroup to which civilians do not have access. The first story, “Redeployment,” opens with,

We shot dogs. Not by accident. We did it on purpose, and we called it Operation Scooby. I’m a dog person, so I thought a lot about that.

First time was instinct. I hear O’Leary go, “Jesus,” and there’s a skinny brown dog lapping up blood the same way he’d lap up water from a bowl. It wasn’t American blood, but still, there’s that dog, lapping it up. And that’s the last straw, I guess, and then it’s open season on dogs. (“Redeployment” 1)

Despite moral qualms, the narrator and his fellow Marines kill dogs in the Iraqi streets because, presumably, they adjudge the dogs’ behavior to be disrespectful to human beings. The action weighs heavily on the conscience of the narrator, however, who considers himself to be “a dog
person” and has a beloved dog waiting for him at home. Scranton takes issue with the story’s opening, claiming that

[t]his short, powerful sentence, while factually true, offers readers a comforting moral lie. “We shot dogs” is as accurate as “We built schools” or “We brought democracy,” and works much the way we seem to want our war literature to function: by foregrounding a peripheral detail, it obscures much more significant big-picture realities. By focusing on how “We shot dogs,” Klay allows American readers to ignore the unpleasant fact that we shot people.42

Scranton’s statement, like Klay’s sentence, is factually true—the text does not say, “We shot people”; but Scranton here gives American readers remarkably little credit, assuming that they are reading a piece of contemporary war literature without awareness (indeed, “ignoring”) the knowledge that the American military killed Iraqis. Lest there be any confusion or uncertainty about such killing, the stories that follow the title story portray American soldiers and Marines who kill a number of differently positioned Iraqis, from a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old in a Fallujah street (“After Action Report”) to a group of faceless insurgents miles away (“Ten Kliks South”) to teens storming out of mosques (“Psychological Operations”). Even within “Redeployment” itself, Marines in the narrator’s squad shoot an Iraqi insurgent taking cover in a cesspit. Structurally, then, the collection’s opening is significant for its establishment of the narrator as engaging in an activity outside the bounds of normally accepted behavior, something about which the narrator later feels shame. The “We” in the story’s opening sentence comprises a military group that includes the narrator and his fellow Marines. They witness the dogs lapping up Iraqi blood, and the burden falls on this group to stop (or not) the dogs from engaging in this behavior and also to live with the consequences of their decision.
The story’s ending highlights the narrator’s post-war moral quagmire through behavior that reads as an extension of his morally injurious actions in Iraq. The narrator’s dog, Vicar, can barely walk or keep from throwing up food, and the narrator knows that someone must put the dog down. Standing on a dirt road with his pet, the narrator thinks of the Iraqi man in the cesspit, at whom he had been unable to fire, and muses, “Staring at Vicar, it was the same thing. This feeling like, something in me is going to break if I do this. And I thought of Cheryl bringing Vicar to the vet, of some stranger putting his hands on my dog, and I thought, I have to do this” (“Redeployment” 15). The narrator feels that no good option exists, but for him the lesser evil is killing the dog himself. He calls on his training and experience to perform the task in the way that will cause the dog the least amount of trauma:

   I focused on Vicar, then on the sights. Vicar disappeared into a gray blur. I switched off the safety. There had to be three shots. It’s not just pull the trigger and you’re done. Got to do it right. Hammer pair to the body. A final well-aimed shot to the head.

   The first two have to be fired quick, that’s important….  

   If I were to shoot you on either side of your heart, one shot…and then another, you’d have two punctured lungs, two sucking chest wounds. Now you’re good and fucked. But you’ll still be alive long enough to feel your lungs fill up with blood.

   If I shoot you there with the shots coming fast, it’s no problem. The ripples tear up your heart and lungs and you don’t do the death rattle, you just die. There’s shock, but no pain. (15–16)

The narrator’s previous experience as a Marine doubly prepares him for his actions on the dirt road: he intimately understands the weapon, how a body reacts to shots fired, etc., and—an
implied understanding—he also knows what it feels like to shoot a domestic animal, indeed, a dog. This knowledge both helps him and hurts him, for he is able to end the dog’s life in the least painful way possible, but, ultimately, he still kills his dog.

In its strategic switch to the second person, the passage also gestures toward the human element whose absence in the opening Scranton laments, and it implicates the reader/civilian as witness. The narrator turns his attention directly toward the reader, articulating what the experience of shooting “you” would be like—the wounds, the pain, the death you would endure. This marks a shift from the opening of the story, where Klay employs the second-person pronoun to place the reader in the narrator’s position: “At the time, you don’t think about it [shooting the dogs]. You’re thinking about who’s in that house, what he’s armed with, how he’s gonna kill you, your buddies. You’re going block by block, fighting with rifles good to 550 meters, and you’re killing people at five in a concrete box” (“Redeployment” 1). Here, the second-person point of view instills in the description at once a sense of immediacy and of on-going action; its usage is impersonal, referencing a general “anyone” who might be in this situation. At the story’s end, however, the tone shifts to the conditional—“if I were to shoot you”—and the sequence of events that unfolds remains purely theoretical. Yet the narrator is a well-trained, experienced Marine, and so the passage implies that the sequence of events is not merely theoretical; the narrator is not shooting the reader, of course, but he has, at some point or another, likely shot a human, and the moral weight of this reality bears heavily in the story’s closing. Further, the passage’s invocation of the reader calls attention to the civilian’s complicity in the action; the one looking on, witnessing the events, can no more wash his/her hands than the one performing them. So, too, with the war watched from a distance.
When the story closes, the narrator/ Marine remains unconnected and alone, unincorporated into the society that sent him to and brought him back from war. He has been redeployed to a nation and even a wife who do not understand him, what he has experienced, and the emotions with which he daily lives, such as when, for example, his senses go on high alert during a routine shopping trip to an American Eagle in Wilmington and he is so amped up that he cannot drive home (“Redeployment” 12–13). Now, having shot his dog, the narrator says, “I stayed there staring at the sights for a while. Vicar was a blur of gray and black. The light was dimming. I couldn’t remember what I was going to do with the body” (16). The narrator stands solitary on the road with his deeds—past and present—and his sorrow, as darkness begins to come on around him and his beloved dog lies dead before him, no longer recognizable. “Redeployment” ends with an image of isolation and confusion—and it is here that *Redeployment* begins.

As with a number of the home front stories such as “Psychological Operations” and “Bodies,” the structure of “Redeployment” mirrors the collection’s larger structure, interweaving war and home front in a complex network of emotion, memory, and action that highlights just how fully the Iraq experience impinges on the veteran’s life. “Redeployment,” for example, begins with the narrator thinking about Iraq, shifts to his trans-Atlantic flight home, moves back to Iraq, then to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, then to the narrator’s home, a mall in Wilmington, back to the war, again to the narrator’s home, then to a deserted road near his home, once more to the war, and finally again to the deserted road where the narrator shoots his dog. The constant shifting produces a sense of unsettledness and dislocation in the narrative that manifests in the narrator’s relinquishing of his rifle upon his arrival in the U.S.: “I didn’t know where to rest my hands. First I put them in my pockets, then I took them out and crossed my
arms, and then I just let them hang, useless, at my sides” (“Redeployment” 6). At the end of the story, he finds a use for his hands, one that involves a rifle and his training and experience from the Marines. The narrator’s shooting of his dog, much like his nerve-wracking experience shopping at the American Eagle with his wife, highlights just how completely his war experience intrudes on his postwar life. Unlike the vast majority of American civilians, the narrator lacks the luxury of separating the past war from the present-day life in the U.S.

The collection’s ending provides an avenue for cultural repair, however, as it develops images of community in the face of pain. In the closing moments of “Ten Kliks South,” the narrator thinks back to two days prior:

We all snapped to attention, not knowing why. Sergeant Deetz raised his right hand in salute, and so did we. Then I saw, off in the distance, well down the road, four Corpsmen coming out of Fallujah Surgical carrying a stretcher draped with the American flag. Everything was silent, still. All down the road, Marines and sailors had snapped to….Everyone standing on the road as the body went past had been so utterly silent, so still. There was no sound or movement except for the slow steps of the Corpsmen and the steady progress of the corpse….Then it would have gone by air to TQ. And as it was unloaded off the bird, the Marines would have stood silent and still, just as we had in Fallujah. And they would have put it on a C-130 to Kuwait. And they would have stood silent and still in Kuwait. And they would have stood silent and still in Germany, and silent and still at Dover Air Force Base. Everywhere it went, Marines and sailors and soldiers and airmen would have stood at attention as it traveled to the family of the fallen, where the silence, the stillness, would end. (287–88)
The scene depicts Marines coming together in a ritualistic way, and the narrator imagines them continuing to do so, over and over again, in order to serve as witness to the passing of a comrade. Shay asserts that “recovery happens only in community,” and, although many of the Marines on the road are personally unacquainted with the dead Marine, their coming together creates a sort of community for the deceased—and also serves as the first step on the road of healing for the gathered men. Indeed, the road motif stands out here for the contrast to its use in the opening story; there the narrator stood alone on the road, isolated in the growing darkness, whereas in the final story the narrator is surrounded by his comrades in “the early morning light” (“Ten Kliks South” 287), indicating a sense of promise and potential. The procession resembles a funerary march, with the repetition of “silent” and “still” imparting an elegiac quality to the passage. According to Michael Sledge, “The funeral, however simple, helps to dispel the wanton randomness of death in battle, and the performance of even simple rites helps the soldiers make contact with a reality they have left behind and hope to regain.” By observing together in a respectful, formal manner their fellow Marine’s passing, these service members begin the long journey toward healing and reintegrating into civil society. The story ends on a somber note—with death—but the final scene nods toward the communal aspect of the military experience and the possibility that community offers for healing.

Though the witnessing by the community of veterans operates as a powerful element in both the story’s and the collection’s closing, the strongest force of the ending lies in its final image: the fallen soldier being reunited with his family. This final image bridges the soldier/civilian divide—albeit in a devastating way—and underscores the importance of ending the silence surrounding the war. Sherman insists that healing from the moral injury of contemporary war requires that civilians bear a “shared moral responsibility” for the costs of
war. The collection’s final image not only illustrates the severe cost to the civilian—losing completely the beloved family member—but it also depicts a citizenry shocked out of complacency. Sherman argues against the silence of civilians, asserting that, “however difficult it is to determine the justness of a cause, civilians are often better situated [than those in the military] to investigate the cause, and are morally and politically able to protest appropriately,” and she urges civilians to engage in open, honest conversation with veterans back from war. Sebastian Junger echoes this sentiment:

Soldiers face myriad challenges when they return home, but one of the most destructive is the sense that their country doesn’t quite realize that it—and not just the soldiers—went to war. The country approved, financed and justified war—and sent the soldiers to fight it. This is important because it returns the moral burden of war to its rightful place: with the entire nation. If a soldier inadvertently kills a civilian in Baghdad, we all helped kill that civilian. If a soldier loses his arm in Afghanistan, we all lost something.

Through the final image that speaks to the crying and mourning of the family for the fallen soldier, Klay eschews the silence that has so frequently surrounded those returning from Iraq. Taken a step further, in ending the silence, the families of the fallen can lay the groundwork for open and engaged discussion about the Iraq War and its consequences, discussion that functions as the necessary precursor for healing, both for the soldier and his/her nation.

**Talking the Talk: Bridging the Gap in “OIF”**

The seemingly unconventional “OIF,” *Redeployment*’s fourth and shortest story, stands out from the surrounding pieces in the collection both for its brevity and its word choice. Relying
heavily on military diction, the narrator describes his time spent conducting basic financial management work in the Marines, a position that, originally, he thought meant he “would work in an office” but ultimately forced him to “go outside the wire” on “twenty-four missions, some with Marine 03s, some with National Guardsmen from 2/136” (“OIF” 73). Eventually the narrator’s vehicle gets hit by an IED, and a Marine under the narrator’s charge dies in the blast, leaving the narrator wracked with guilt. Sacks claims that the story is “told entirely in acronymic military jargon,” through which Klay “underscores how language itself divides civilians from soldiers.” Indeed, the military is well-known for its jargon-heavy language and acronyms bear a notable presence in the piece; however, they account for fewer than 10% of the story’s words. Moreover, these acronyms—along with other military abbreviations and the slang terms that accompany them—perform more nuanced work than merely dividing soldiers and civilians and, indeed, ultimately connect the two groups. The narrator initially uses military language to gesture toward the gulf that exists between the experiences of the soldier-narrator and civilian-reader and also to shield himself from the judgment of civilians; but the permeability of the jargon finally points to the way in which language can bridge the gap that perpetuates the isolating state of moral injury.

The story’s title itself designates the acronym for Operation Iraqi Freedom, the military’s code name for what in common parlance is known as the Iraq War or the war in Iraq but has also been referred to by a number of other monikers such as the Second Gulf War, the Second Persian Gulf War, and the Second Iraq War. As a story title, “OIF” indicates that what follows serves as a kind of representative tale for the Iraq War experience, in this case as told from the American male Marine point of view. This experience consists of fear, boredom, violence, loss, grief, and confusion, all of which is borne out in the three-page story that follows the brief title. The story
does not provide the narrator or the character he spends the most time talking about a proper name; instead the narrator refers to the character by his military rank, “PFC,” the acronym for private first class. Such a reference immediately creates distance between the narrator and PFC and highlights PFC’s expendability as merely another cog in the U.S. military machine. He exists to perform a role in the pursuit of the military’s aims, and the narrator views him as such. At the same time, the acronym’s repetition throughout the story—eleven mentions in just three pages—eventually renders it more like a nickname. No other character in the story holds the rank of private first class and, by the end of the piece, this character becomes singularly recognizable as PFC.

At the start, the story separates the narrator and his readers by virtue of their different language. While the text initially looks like an incomprehensible jumble of “alphabet soup,” a closer reading reveals a more complex and layered reality. More than eighty-five military acronyms riddle the three-page story, in addition to a variety of military abbreviations (e.g., “08s” and “2/136”) and phrases/slang (e.g., “fair comp” and “left-seat right-seat”) (“OIF” 73). The story’s opening lists the only partially comprehensible (from the point of view of the civilian) names of individuals/groups involved in and activities conducted as a part of Operation Iraqi Freedom: “EOD handled the bombs. SSTP treated the wounds. PRP processed the bodies. The 08s fired DCPIM. The MAW provided CAS. The 03s patrolled the MSRs.” Although “bombs,” “wounds,” “bodies,” “fired,” and “patrolled” register as familiar elements of a contemporary war lexicon, the remainder of the terms defamiliarizes the passage because of the words un-interpretability. The narrator then introduces two central characters with “Me and PFC handled the money,” followed by a short paragraph detailing the narrator’s duties, complete with references to the “ISF,” “CERP,” “ESB,” “03s,” the “FOB, where it’s safe” and “MSRs,”
military terminology that likely holds little or no meaning for the typical civilian reader (73). Up to this point, the story uses language to build walls between the narrator and readers.

In spite of, and to some extent by means of, the language barrier, however, “OIF” begins to construct a sympathetic narrator through the creation of a shared human understanding. In the third paragraph, the narrator reveals personal details that, despite the inclusion of jargon, translate easily enough through a shared human language of empathy:

I never wanted to leave the FOB. I never wanted to drive the MSRs or roll with 03s. PFC did. But me, when I got 3400 in boot camp, I thought, Great. I’d work in an office, be a POG. Be the POG of POGs and then go to college for business. I didn’t need to get some, I needed to get the G.I. Bill. But when I was training at BSTS, they told me, You better learn this, 3400s go outside the wire. A few months later, I was strapped up, M4 in Condition 1, surrounded by 03s, backpack full of cash, twitchiest guy in Iraq. (“OIF” 73)

Though the majority of acronyms and abbreviations in this paragraph remain unclear in isolation, the gist of the narrator’s sentiments comes across clearly: he was frightened and reluctant to leave a safe place (the FOB) and, when forced to do so, he became very nervous. The general outline of this experience is recognizable not only in a military context but also in any anxiety-provoking situation. Further, the military jargon of the paragraph begins to gain some shape as a consequence of its repetition and context within the paragraph. Initially appearing in the first paragraph, MSRs and 03s, while not necessarily clear and comprehensible terms, are at least familiar. Recognition of “3400” as the Military Occupational Specialty of a Basic Financial Management Marine is unnecessary because the general meaning of POG becomes clear from its context: the term’s association with working in an office and the narrator’s submission to being
the “POG of all POGs” suggests that this term is not a descriptor of bravery. Moreover, the term may already be familiar from its connection with the slang term *pogue*, which appears in some standard dictionaries. Regardless of the exact specifics of the 3400’s duties, the position is clearly not the most valiant one available. While the passage does not encourage complete understanding of its literal, factual content, it opens the way for shared understanding on the emotional level.

Within a few paragraphs, the jargon begins to create a basic shared vocabulary between Marine and civilian, which helps to cement a shared understanding. Acronyms common in contemporary American discourse creep into the story as the narrator describes his team’s exploits: “We scanned for all different types of IEDS AQI would throw at us” (“OIF” 74), he says, and even if *Al-Qaeda in Iraq* does not become immediately obvious as the referent of *AQI*, the use of *IED* for *improvised explosive device* has become common and recognizable, as the phrase served as a staple in television news and newspaper reportage about the war. In the same paragraph, the narrator mentions IEDs three more times with the terms *VBIEDs* and *SVBIEDs*, and, although “vehicle-borne” and “suicide vehicle-borne” may not be obvious alterations, knowledge of *IED*’s meaning provides sufficient understanding to make sense of the passage. The narrator then references “C4,” an explosive frequently mentioned in popular cop/crime television dramas (e.g., *N.C.I.S, CSI, Burn Notice*), and the “daisy-chained” IEDs that call to mind a familiar iconography of childhood bracelets. While the Marines’ activities remain heavily jargonized, the danger of their world begins to bleed through in a comprehensible way as the narrator’s language takes on the buzz words and idioms of popular culture.

Moreover, discerning the exact meaning of every term could hardly be further from the point. Whether or not the reader understands that the “NAM with a V” that the narrator is
eventually awarded stands for the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal with a distinction for Valor, the intended meaning and implication of the award are clear from his response: “But give me a NAM with a V, give me the Medal of Honor, it doesn’t change that I’m still breathing. And when people ask what the NAM is for, I say it’s so I don’t feel bad that I was too slow for PFC.” The narrator views the award as consolation for his failure to save PFC when their HMMWV hit an IED and then caught fire. The award’s placement alongside the Medal of Honor—an accolade, again, commonly referenced in popular culture—indicates the NAM’s prestige and serves to highlight the disconnect between the narrator’s feelings about the event and the military’s response to it.

Here Klay’s protagonist loses his shield of language and discloses the issue at the heart of his own moral injury: his sense of responsibility for the death of a man under his charge. Those individuals outside the situation recognize that the narrator was in no way capable of or responsible for saving PFC under the circumstances, but, like so many service members, the narrator sees PFC’s death as something “he let happen on his watch.”51 “I will remember that I was his NCO, so he was my responsibility,” he says (“OIF” 75). The narrator’s guilt over his own survival complicates his emotional state. He muses, “I will remember that our HMMWV had 5 PX. That the SITREP was 2 KIA, 3 WIA. That KIA means they gave everything. That WIA means I didn’t” (76). Importantly, these concluding lines, which cement the emotional core of the story, make use of almost no new or indecipherable terminology. “PFC,” “HMMWV,” “E4” are already familiar from earlier in the piece; “PRO/CON” is a common term in U.S. cultural discourse, and “KIA” appears frequently in reports of war casualties; though perhaps not as familiar, “WIA”’s similarities to “KIA” suggest its general meaning, as does its context within the sentence. If “NCO” does not immediately translate to “non-commissioned officer,” the
narrator’s statement that PFC “was my responsibility” sufficiently explains the acronym’s importance. Without his jargon to protect him, the narrator becomes defenseless, left only with his guilt over PFC’s death and whatever judgement others may (or may not) make.

“OIF” enacts, on the linguistic level, the collection’s push and pull of the military protagonist away from and then back toward the civilian reader. While initially the military jargon acts as a disorienting force, by the end of the story the language opens up with more easily recognizable abbreviations and phrases, including “OEF,” “KIA,” “WIA,” “SITREP,” “HMMWV,” and pulls soldier and civilian together. Television news, popular TV shows, and movies have incorporated these and other elements of military discourse into contemporary American culture and the layperson’s lexicon. Nonetheless, “OIF” features moments of disorientation, as when, right in the middle of the story, the narrator’s HMMWV is hit by the IED that kills PFC:

PV2 swerved and the HMMWV rolled. It wasn’t like the HEAT training at Lejeune. JP-8 leaked and caught fire, burning through my MARPATs. Me and SGT Green got out, and then we pulled PV2 out by the straps of his PPE. But PV2 was unconscious, and I ran back for PFC, but he was on the side where the IED hit, and it was too late.

PFC’s Eye Pro cracked and warped in the heat. The plastic snaps on his PPE melted. And even though J-15 left his legs behind, at least he got CASEVAC’d to the SSTP and died on the table. PRP had to wash PFC out with Simple Green and peroxide (“OIF” 74–75).

Given the most likely unfamiliar military jargon, the civilian must rely upon context and a developing sense of empathy with the narrator to make sense of the action. As part of
Redeployment’s larger project, “OIF”’s reincorporation of a narrative and a diction that, at the start, reads as foreign and unassimilable into mainstream American experience gestures toward the possibility of bridging the civilian-military divide in attempts to heal the complex wounds of the war. These wounds permeate understanding on multiple levels, including the linguistic and the emotional, but a shared human empathy and willingness to listen offer the possibility of moving forward.

**First-person Shooters: How to Tell a True War Story, according to a Dozen Different Guys**

In its presentation of the Iraq War experience, Redeployment utilizes a dozen first-person narrators, each an American male currently or previously involved in the war effort and all but one of whom (the narrator of “Money as a Weapons System”) is serving or has previously served as a United States soldier or Marine. These narrators represent different ranks within the U.S. Armed Forces, from lance corporal to sergeant to lieutenant, and undertake various assignments, including artilleryman, Marine Corps engineer, and adjutant. The narrators tell stories variously rooted at Fort Lejeune, in Fallujah, at al Taqqadum Airbase in Iraq, as well as in a host of locales throughout civilian America, including a strip club called the Pussycat, unnamed bars out west and in New York City, NYU law school, Amherst College, and elsewhere. While the collection’s reliance on the first person might seem to ally it with the genre of memoir, the continual shifting from the viewpoint of one character to another undermines the consistency of perspective that typically characterizes memoir. In utilizing a dozen different narrators, Klay brings together disparate yet related voices, each of which alone offers something akin to what General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, referred to as “the soda straw view of war” because of the narrowness of each embedded reporter’s coverage. When taken together, however, these voices
provide a more complex and nuanced portrait of the conflict than could a single perspective. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Klay notes, “We have a tendency to think of war as this quasi-mystical thing, and that interpretation flattens the experience—by using different perspectives, I wanted to open a place for readers to compare and contrast, to make judgments, to engage.”

In its presentation of these various perspectives, *Redeployment* engages the traditions of both realism and metafiction, challenging the nature of reality in the very process of creating it. As Patricia Waugh notes, metafiction and realism are not fundamentally at odds: “Metafiction explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism; it does not ignore or abandon them. Very often realistic conventions supply the ‘control’ in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves.” According to Raymond Williams, realism in literature “is both a method and a general attitude” in which “the characters, actions, objects, and situations…are lifelike in description or appearance.” Crucially, the representation “is not really lifelike but by convention and repetition has been made to appear so.” Klay’s stories of IED blasts and exhausted soldiers on patrol convey lifelike characters and situations, and through convention—the use of dialogue, for example, or frame narration—such representations become normalized. At the same time, however, the text questions the nature of the reality it constructs via techniques of metafiction, which Waugh defines as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”

Illustrating Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s notion of social reality as a construction, *Redeployment*’s self-consciousness reveals how cultural narratives of the Iraq War have come to be developed in American culture. The text’s self-consciousness manifests in
a persistent focus on storytelling. Both “Psychological Operations” and “War Stories” center on the telling of war stories in their content and form, while “After Action Report,” “Bodies,” “In Vietnam They Had Whores,” and “Prayer in the Furnace” utilize the concept of stories and storytelling as a means for considering issues of truth, guilt, connection, and responsibility. According to Sacks’ review of *Redeployment*, the collection’s “greatest weakness…is its overt writerliness: It too often makes you think about war fiction more than war itself.” However, *Redeployment* renders these two things inextricable: the text, that is, foregrounds how talking about the Iraq War—its representation via language—cannot be separated from the war itself. In so doing, the collection, “helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly ‘written.’” By demonstrating his “ability to manipulate and construct hypothetical” war stories in the pages of *Redeployment*, Klay demonstrates how the creation of such narratives “is also a condition of social existence.”

The focus on the creation of stories, paired with the collection’s metafictional bent, reveals strong parallels with O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, which, according to Robin Silbergleid, urges readers “to question truth…generally, particularly as it related to the representation of Vietnam.” To engage in this questioning, O’Brien creates a work that is, as Catherine Calloway writes, “as much about the process of writing as it is the text of a literary work.” *Things* comprises twenty-two stories relating the tales of a platoon of U.S. soldiers during and after the Vietnam War. Included among these soldiers is a Tim O’Brien character/narrator roughly, but not entirely, based on the author. The twenty-two pieces explore “imagination and memory” and the rhetorical/narrative construction of the Vietnam War, employing what Mark Heberle calls “a wide variety of discursive gestures, including recollection, confession, and explanation, as well as explicit storytelling.”
Because of *Redeployment*’s engagement with issues of storytelling with regard to war, Connie Ogle calls Klay’s collection “the spiritual heir” of *The Things They Carried.* The two texts’ formal similarities do, in fact, indicate the ways in which the discursive legacy of the Vietnam War—what Frederic Jameson has called “the first terrible postmodernist war”—has laid the groundwork for the Iraq War. Like *Things, Redeployment* investigates questions of memory and truth and invokes the reader in its process of storytelling, pointing to the ways in which meaning is continually in the process of being constructed. Klay’s text also echoes O’Brien’s “evaluation” of “the experience of war,” which is, according to Marilyn Wesley, “less decisive and more inclusive” with regard to blame and responsibility. In other words, Klay, like O’Brien, “does not allow the soldier the illusions of separation from a morally deficient culture or abdication of personal responsibility,” which is common in literature from previous American conflicts. S/he must instead accept complicity for participation in the actions of war.

Ogle notes, however, that, “instead of mimicking O’Brien’s metafictional stories based on his own experiences about the men in a single platoon, Klay…expands his stories to include a wide variety of experience.” As such Klay achieves a multiplicitous view of the Iraq War. Further, whereas a Tim O’Brien character/narrator who is a writer appears in many of the pieces in *Things*—lending to the creation of “autobiographical metafiction”—Klay does not appear in his own (meta)fictional world, and none of the characters in *Redeployment* is a writer. “Even in my earliest stories,” says Klay, “I knew I wasn’t writing about myself.” That said, the narrator of “Unless It’s a Sucking Chest Wound” is a former member of a Public Affairs unit as was Klay while he served in the Marine Corps, a position that no doubt provided the author with raw material for the story. Moreover, while O’Brien revises and rewrites events from story to story (such as Curt Lemon’s death and the killing of the dainty young Vietnamese soldier) and utilizes
the same set of characters (the men of Alpha Company) across the twenty-two pieces of the book, each of *Redeployment*'s twelve stories functions as a discrete unit in terms of subject matter and character.

Metafiction works in both texts to explore the ways in which stories can—and cannot—reveal the ultimate truth at the core of experience. But if, as Inger Christensen claims, “the novelist’s message” is one of the most important elements of metafiction, then the divergent messages of Klay’s and O’Brien’s works offer a useful means for considering the distinction between truth as conceived with regard to the war in Vietnam and the war in Iraq. By distinguishing fact from truth and exploring the possibility inherent in storytelling, *Things* offers the ultimate knowability of the Vietnam experience through story. The collection sets the stage with the introduction of the “slim, dead, dainty young man of about twenty” in “Spin,” who reappears many pages later in “The Man I Killed.” This latter story describes the man in greater physical detail, invents for him a history (e.g., “He had been born, maybe, in 1946 in the village of My Khe”), and revisits details about him over the course of six pages. The next piece, “Ambush,” elaborates on and revises “The Man I Killed,” offering a fantasy-like ending to character-O’Brien’s encounter with the Vietnamese man, one in which he walks by in the present day “and suddenly smile[s] at some secret thought and then continues[s] up the trail to where it bends back into the fog.” In this final version, the man escapes, unscathed, a clear contradiction to the previous descriptions. Forty pages later, however, in “Good Form,” O’Brien takes an entirely different tack, revising the story of the Vietnamese man’s death yet again: “twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough.” O’Brien then revises the story again, saying,
But listen. Even *that* story is made up.

I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.

Here is the happening-truth. I was a soldier once. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I’m left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.83

Here the story eliminates any mention of the Vietnamese man. When finally O’Brien proceeds with the story-truth in the next paragraph, he repeats the description from the earlier stories, where the young man is “slim” and “almost dainty” and has “a star-shaped hole” for an eye.84 According to Silbergleid “…‘Good Form’ operates as synecdoche, standing in for the project of *The Things They Carried* in its entirety”: “truth itself is a category open to question, arrived at here through fiction.”85 *Things* uncouples fact from truth and proffers fiction as a means for getting at the truth of experience.

*Redeployment*, by contrast, settles upon no final, pure truth about the Iraq War. Klay’s text insists that story will always be mediated and therefore truth, no matter how one describes it, can never exist unvarnished. “Psychological Operations” investigates this issue, utilizing metafiction to consider how all stories contain some degree of spin in their telling, whether purposely or not. Formerly part of a PsyOps team in Iraq, the narrator, Waguih, is now a student at Amherst College in Massachusetts where he engages in a heated debate with fellow student Zara Davies, a recent convert to Islam. After being called into the office of the college’s Special Assistant because of threatening remarks Waguih made to Zara, he runs after her and asks to tell her his story of watching someone die in Iraq. To the reader Waguih says, “I wasn’t PsyOpsing her into it, so I didn’t know how she’d react. Or if I was PsyOpsing her, since you’re always
exerting some kind of pressure even when you’re laying yourself bare, then it was the least
conscious maneuvering I could do” (“Psychological” 181). Here, Klay’s story characterizes even
the most honest and straightforward representation as a form of coercion; an individual possesses
goals and biases, and his/her desires will, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the situation,
reveal themselves in that individual’s words and actions. As evidence of how effective such
psychological tactics can be, the preceding scene in the story presents Waguih just moments
earlier, in the meeting with the Special Assistant, doing the very thing he is trying not to do in
the following scene and successfully evading punishment as a result. Nevertheless, stories offer a
necessary means of communication and, therefore, connection between people: “But if you’re
going to be understood,” Waguih says, “you have to keep talking. And that was the mission.
Make her understand me” (197). Like Things, then, Redeployment forwards story as a means for
forging connection and getting at truth, but Klay’s collection does so with a greater awareness of
the forces that are always at work in shaping and manipulating the form that truth and story will
take.

Indeed, “War Stories” literally enacts the mediation of a war story with opposing interests
struggling for control of Jenks’ narrative. At a New York bar, Sarah, a young playwright, grills a
former Marine Corps engineer named Jenks about his experience during and following the IED
blast that has left him badly disfigured. Sarah attempts to structure the conversation so that she
gains the information she seeks and can construct a sense-making narrative for a play she plans
to write. Even though she begins by telling Jenks, “‘At your own pace….Whatever you think
people should know’” (“War Stories” 223), Sarah soon becomes displeased by his non-linear
style of storytelling and tries to rein him in: “‘What’s the first thing you remember?’” she says,
and “‘Do you remember the explosion itself?’”—information that will help to ground the story in
a logical starting place (224, 225). As Jenks veers into descriptions of his post-blast “‘weird reactions,’” Sarah tries to change the subject back to a previous topic of conversation, saying, “‘So you try to remember—’” (227). Then, after Jenks and his friend and former Marine comrade Wilson read from the papers on which Jenks has written his blast story, once Jenks blows “his story of triumph too early in the conversation” (230), Sarah asks him to “‘take [her] through’” his fifty-four reconstructive surgeries and again insists on chronological order with, “Good….But let’s slow down. What happened first?” (231). For Sarah, the proper story of Jenks’ trial and triumph, the proper war story, must be assimilable into an easy-to-understand and -consume narrative structure.

In contrast, Jenks understands his experience through the complex matrix of bodily sensation and pain and has tried to impose his own structuring device—the written narrative—to create a story that he can share. In so doing, however, a formulaic narrative replaces the essential core of his experience. The first thing that comes to Jenks’ mind is “‘a lot of pain for a long, long time’”; he remembers “‘[s]craps and pieces’” (“War Stories” 223), such as “‘a flash, definitely. There was a sulfur smell, like the Fourth of July, but real close,’” and “‘black hitting so hard’” (225). Far from a linear narrative, Jenks’ memory comprises a collection of sensory experiences. In an effort to make sense of his experience, he has “‘written this twenty times,’” going through draft after draft of the encounter and what came after. Even his written attempts are grounded in the senses, however, as he “‘always start[s] with the explosions, the smells’” (227). But rendering the event as a written narrative does not help Jenks to get at some full and essential truth, whatever that may be, any more effectively: “‘The problem is I’m not sure what’s real memory and what’s my brain filling in details’” (225). Writing does help him to shape his story in a particular way, however. Later in the conversation Jenks takes to reading from his papers:
“What they are not clear about but what is very clear to me is that it was not just Doc Sampson who saved my life. It was the first guys who got to my vehicle…the Marines who called in a nine-line. The pilots who flew out. The flight nurse who kept me alive on the flight. The docs at TQ who stabilized me. The docs at Landstuhl. All the docs at all the places I’ve been to stateside.”

…I am alive because of so many people.” (229)

In this particular version, Jenks offers a scripted story of heroism and gratitude. The passage’s rhetorical momentum builds in a way that would be unlikely in an extemporaneous situation. He finishes with, “Perhaps I’ve sacrificed more for my country than most, but I’ve sacrificed far, far less than some. I have good friends. I have all my limbs. I have my brain and my soul and hope for the future” (230). Where his sensory experiences have failed to facilitate a complete understanding of his experience, Jenks uses written narrative to create a story that progresses and climaxes; the result is a tale that sounds as though it has been borrowed from a rousing movie speech. Jenks’s efforts at making his story comprehensible to others have turned his experience into the kind of feel-good narrative that listeners might expect and that they know how to process—his story, in other words, has lost the essence at its core, its truth, as he has constructed his tale as a standard redemptive war narrative.

Throughout Redeployment, Klay demonstrates how the act of storytelling helps to construct the reality of war. In “After Action Report,” Timhead kills a teenager who is firing on him and his fellow Marines in a dark Fallujah street; immediately upset by his action, Timhead asks the narrator, Ozzie, to take responsibility for the shooting. Ozzie agrees, noting, “Who could say I didn’t?” (“After Action” 34). Indeed, no other Marines were in the area at the time, and therefore no one can contest the veracity of Ozzie’s story:
It was bullshit, but every time I told the story, it felt better. Like I owned it a little more. When I told the story, everything was clear. I made diagrams. Explained the angles of bullet trajectories. Even saying it was dark and dusty and fucking scary made it less dark and dusty and fucking scary. So when I thought back on it, there were the memories I had, and the stories I told, and they sort of sat together in my mind, the stories becoming stronger every time I retold them. (35)

Despite the factual inaccuracy of Ozzie’s tale—“It was bullshit”—and his own knowledge of that inaccuracy, his story begins to alter the reality of the shooting for him. Telling the story changes him. Later in the story, as Timhead continues to have trouble coping with his killing of the child, Ozzie visits the Staff Sergeant and tells “him everything Timhead said about the kid, but like it was me” (41). The release the narrator feels here is palpably his own, as though he is sharing the details of an act he has committed. Living Timhead’s story has made it true for Ozzie. So, too, for their fellow Marines, who respond to Ozzie as though he, and not Timhead, really killed “the dumbshit hajji” (32). After Mac dies, for instance, Jobrani says to Ozzie, “‘At least you got one. One of those fucks’” (37). Having supplied ostensibly believable facts and details about the situation and repeated them again and again, Ozzie has become, in the eyes of the unit, the Marine who shot and killed the Iraqi teenager.

The ability of storytelling to alter reality supplies a particular challenge to the Iraq War narrative of heroism. In “Prayer in the Furnace,” for example, Rodriguez reveals the unsavory circumstances of Fuji’s death: in order to increase their unit’s statistics, Sergeant Ditoro forces junior enlisted men to do jumping jacks in their underwear on a rooftop in an effort to provoke enemy fire, and a sniper shoots and kills Fuji during the course of this activity. Ditoro and Rodriguez put Fuji’s pants back on, “‘[a]nd we get back and it was, you know, another hash
mark. On the Most Contact Board. We went out and found the enemy, instead of waiting for him to IED us. And our stats went up’” (“Prayer” 138). The men in this unit are now considered more heroic by others in the company, but only as the result of a grievous error in judgment and lapse in protocol. Rodriguez tries to right the situation by telling the chaplain, the story’s narrator, who he hopes will make the truth known to those in positions of power; when the chaplain speaks about the event to those in the upper echelons, however, the major says, “‘This is nothing….Last month Weapons Company shot two hajjis I know they didn’t follow ROE [Rules of Engagement] on. And Colonel Fehr didn’t think that was worth an investigation….You think Lieutenant Colonel Fehr will ever become Colonel Fehr if he tells higher, “Hey, we think we did some war crimes”? ’” (144). Thus the facts about Fuji’s death continue to be suppressed because they do not confirm the leadership’s preferred narratives, and the unit’s story remains one of heroism.

“Prayer” also employs a fictional YouTube video to replace notions of heroism with violence. At an anti-war gathering (Winter Soldier), a former Marine, Alex Newberry, “showed a video of Marines firing on mosques and talked about conducting ‘recon by fire,’ where he said they would shoot up a neighborhood in order to start a firefight” (“Prayer” 163–64). A “mess” of comments follow the video:

“I was there. Alex no telling the whole story.” “This guy was the biggest shit bag ever.”
“boohoo they had to kill some people. what did he think was gonna happen when he became a MACHINE GUNNER IN THE MARINE INFANTRY.” “It’s the commanders fault don’t feel bad Alex.” “No one told him to kill innocent people he did it himself and blames the Corps he committed war crimes what a nut and its not true this happens often i known im a Marine.” (164)
With their varying points of view, the comments intervene in the video’s creation of the war story by drawing attention to the video’s creator and his subjectivity (e.g., “‘Alex no telling the whole story’”). Moreover, by presenting to the world an ugly reality, the video raises the question of what, precisely, heroism means with regard to the Iraq War. Infuriated over Alex’s participation in the Winter Soldier event, Major Haupert says to the narrator,

“It’s not whether it happened or not. You don’t talk about some of the shit that happened….You can’t describe it to someone who wasn’t there, you can hardly remember how it was yourself because it makes so little sense…And then Alex is gonna go and act like a big hero telling everybody how bad we were. We weren’t bad. I wanted to shoot every Iraqi I saw, every day. And I never did.” (165)

Heroism has morphed into a choice between two grim possibilities: the confession of atrocities, on the one hand, or abstention from committing them, on the other. Neither of these versions gels with popular notions of American soldiers as liberators and bringers of freedom and democracy to the long-suffering Iraqi people. Instead these versions contribute to a war narrative starring a military somewhere between on the brink of and just returned from grotesque violence and inhumanity, far from friends of the Iraqi people.

*Redeployment* draws attention to the tension inherent between telling and not telling difficult stories. In “Prayer,” Haupert questions Alex’s motives for telling his war story and both the chaplain and Rodriguez see their efforts to tell Fuji’s war story rebuffed and their stories replaced with an alternate narrative. In “War Stories” the narrator disagrees with his friend’s decision to meet with Sarah, who intends to use Jenks’ story in the development of a play: “…I’d told him that if he gave this girl his story, it wouldn’t be his anymore. Like, if you take a photograph of someone, you’re stealing their soul, except this would be deeper than a picture.
Your story is you.” Jenks offers no verbal disagreement—“He never argues with me, he just goes his own way” —and, in fact, “War Stories” indicates that giving his story away might just be precisely what Jenks wants to do (225). Jenks demonstrates a near-obsessive need to render the experience correctly, as illustrated by his repeated revision of the written narrative, and he desires to share it with all who will listen, even Sarah who, according to the narrator, has “a sliver of ice in her” (231). Jenks’ life has been consumed by the facts and events that constitute his story—the pain and disfigurement, the surgeries and physical therapy; by giving his story away to Sarah, even some small part, perhaps Jenks can give away some of his burden.

The connection between the military/veteran character and the civilian is a defining feature of Klay’s collection and distinguishes it from O’Brien’s, gesturing toward the differences in the post-war cultures of the Vietnam and Iraq eras. In O’Brien’s text, soldiers and veterans most commonly share their war stories with one another and find they cannot communicate with civilians. Rat Kiley in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” for instance, relates the story of Mary Anne Bell to narrator-O’Brien and Mitchell Sanders.86 The men imagine telling stories to civilians—Jimmy Cross thinks of the letter he will write to Kiowa’s father (“In the Field”) and Norman Bowker the war story he would tell his father (“Speaking of Courage”)—but these stories remain in the realm of imagination. When narrator-O’Brien does share with civilians, they misunderstand, such as the “older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics,” who does not like the gore of war stories and feels sad for the baby buffalo in “How to Tell.” Though O’Brien refrains from saying so, what he think is, “You dumb cooze. Because she wasn’t listening. It wasn’t a war story. It was a love story.”87 In “On the Rainy River,” narrator-O’Brien asks the reader, “What would you do? Would you jump?” and dodge the draft; but for as compelling a question as this is, it does nothing to communicate the experience of the actual war
to someone outside the military community. Even two decades after the war, O’Brien can only offer his daughter Kathleen the most perfunctory of answers when they travel together to Vietnam in “Field Trip,” where they “visited the site of Kiowa’s death, and where he looked for signs of forgiveness or personal grace or whatever else the land might offer”:

“Well,” she said, “I hope you’re having fun.”

“Sure.”

“Can we go now?”

“In a minute,” I said. “Just relax.”

At the back of the jeep I found the small cloth bundle I’d carried over from the States.

Kathleen’s eyes narrowed. “What’s that?”

“Stuff.”

The bundle contains Kiowa’s moccasins, which he deposits into the muck after wading out to knee-level water; father and daughter have come to a crucially important place in the narrator’s history—the place where his friend and comrade Kiowa died twenty years ago—but, even now, the narrator is unable to share the story with his daughter.

This reticence of the men to talk about their experiences to those who were not directly involved in the war effort reflects the uninterested American cultural climate during the Vietnam era. Though returning soldiers did not typically endure the outright hostility vaunted by the media, veterans most often encountered indifference from the American public, which Myra Macpherson refers to as its own “form of punishment.” This indifference was evidenced in a lack of parades, “meager GI benefits,” “unconcern for Vet Centers or Agent Orange studies,” as well as a lack of interest in hearing about veterans’ experiences overseas. “Speaking of Courage”
casts Norman Bowker’s Iowa hometown as the personification of this American indifference: “The town…would not listen….the place could only blink and shrug. It had no memory, therefore no guilt.”

Men like Bowker, like character/narrator-O’Brien, cannot tell their stories, cannot talk to those who have not personally experienced the war because no one is willing to hear what they have to say. Things, then, as John H. Timmerman asserts, is a work “about telling one’s story into an apparent abyss.”

Klay’s text, by contrast, depicts soldiers/veterans sharing their stories with a variety of civilians, hinting at the potential for storytelling to help spread the moral burdens of war in the contemporary American environment. In “War Stories,” Sarah actively seeks Jenks’ war story so that she can incorporate it into a play to share with the greater New York community. The narrator distrusts and criticizes her throughout the whole story, but Jessie says of Sarah, “‘She’ll listen to him [Jenks]’” (“War Stories” 232). Although Sarah lacks perfect manners and entirely pure motives, she does want to hear Jenks’ story and learn about and share his war experience.

“Bodies” shows a soldier opening up to a stranger at a bar after failing to confide in his ex-girlfriend. The narrator, a Mortuary Affairs Officer, tells the man “a story about the worst burn case we ever had. Worst not in charring or loss of body parts, just worst” (“Bodies” 69). When the man responds, “‘I respect what you’ve been through,’” the narrator says, “‘I don’t want you to respect what I’ve been through….I want you to be disgusted,’” and the man acquiesces, sitting in silence with the narrator (71). In this way, the man shares in the narrator’s moral injury, taking some of the horror onto himself; at least for the time that he sits next to the narrator at the bar. He listens to and accepts the narrator’s story without offering judgment on it or the narrator. In “Prayer,” the chaplain writes to his former teacher, an old Jesuit priest, about his struggles with his unit; the old priest writes back, offering kindly advice. The sense of being able to share war
experiences with civilians resounds in Klay’s collection, pointing to the possibility that storytelling holds for healing in the post-Iraq era.

More than any other piece in *Redeployment*, “Psychological Operations” illustrates the complexities of storytelling as a form of healing. In this piece, the narrator shares his war stories with the Special Assistant, his father, and Zara; the results of his sharing are different in each case—but so, too, are his goals for and methods of storytelling. With the Special Assistant, Waguih is in full PsyOps mode, performing the part of the disturbed veteran to shift focus from his wrongdoing and evade punishment for threatening Zara. He tells the Special Assistant, “I got shot at….Kind of a lot. And I saw people, yes, gunned down. Blown up. Pieces of men. Women. Children….I helped as I could. I did what’s right. Right by America, anyway. But those aren’t pleasant memories. And for someone to get in your face.” He describes his behavior as a performance: “I was laying it on thick,” and “I trailed off, glancing toward the ceiling in anguish” (“Psychological” 177). In response, the Special Assistant vacillates between “panicked” and “determining how big of a liar [Waguih] was before deciding on a course of minimum liability,” but, in the end, the narrator’s manufactured war story gets him out of trouble.

Purposeful performance and outright manipulation characterize this interaction, but, although Waguih gains from it what he seeks (i.e., he escapes punishment), his storytelling does not help to unburden him on an emotional level.

In Waguih’s interaction with his father, storytelling serves as a tool for wounding. Waguih and his overbearing father share a historically difficult relationship that is now complicated by the father’s expectations of his son as a soldier. Following Waguih’s return from Iraq, he tells his father the story of Laith al-Tawid, leader of an Iraqi band of insurgents that
Waguih’s PsyOps team drew out of hiding with insults about his wife and daughters. The father deeply dislikes the story:

“And I told my father everything. Insult by insult. All the things I’d learned in America, all the things I’d learned from him, all the things that had been said to me, all the things I could think of, and I could think of a lot.”

…I’d kept going, described every sexual act, every foul Arabic word. I’d cursed for him and at him in English, in Egyptian, in Iraqi, in MSA, in Koranic Arabic, in Bedouin slang, and he’d said, “Enough, enough,” his voice shaking with rage and then terror. (“Psychological” 210)

The narrator uses the story to injure his father—to disgust, shock, and dishonor—and as a means of “letting [his own] rage wash out.” After many years spent at his father’s mercy, Waguih is now in the position of power, “standing over” his father, “shouting insults in his face.” Waguih’s story reduces his father to a sad state and also helps to reveal the weaknesses that Waguih has previously been unable to notice: “His hands trembled, his eyes were downcast. There was gray in his mustache. He looked old. Beaten. I’d never seen him that way before” (211). The war story, in this instance, functions as a tool of division and pain, both for Waguih and his father.

With Zara, however, Waguih attempts to use his war stories to create a connection rather than to inflict injury. The narrator shares his story of al-Tawid by way of telling Zara about how his father kicked him out of the house and, at the same time, he opens himself up to the same kind of censure and displeasure that he received at home. Although he claims to “‘feel good about what’” he did in the war, Waguih’s hedging and revisiting of various wartime experiences makes clear that he struggles with various choices, such as the decision to shoot teenage insurgents running out of mosques or, in this case, the insult campaign against al-Tawid.
(“Psychological” 202). He suggests as much when he muses, “‘What happened, what I was a part of, maybe it was the right thing. We were fighting very bad people. But it was an ugly thing.’” By telling the story of al-Tawid to Zara, the narrator wants not simply “to share something, but to unload it” (203). He desires to shift the burden of the story, the moral injury it has induced, onto her. Though the story displeases Zara, as the narrator suspected it would, she does not respond in the anticipated way. Instead “[s]he reached out and put her hand on my shoulder, her touch light and warm. Even though her face was calm, my heart was beating and I looked up at her as though she were passing down a sentence. There was an unearthly quality to her then. ‘It’s okay,’ she said. ‘I’m glad you can talk about it….Maybe we’ll talk another time’” (212). With this final gesture of connection—her hand on the narrator’s shoulder—and creation of the possibility of continued dialogue, Zara confirms the potential of the war story to function as a force for good, a force for connection between soldier and civilian and, perhaps eventually, healing of war’s wounds.

Who Is the Enemy?: Humanizing the Other and Resisting Rhetorical Binaries

Taking a cue from President George W. Bush, whom Singer has dubbed “the president of good and evil” due to his repeated moralizing,92 official and media sources frequently cast the Iraq War as a war of opposites: us vs. them, Christianity vs. radical Islam, democracy vs. tyranny, freedom vs. fear, and, most prominently, good vs. evil. In such a war, the United States and her agents (e.g., soldiers) stood as the epitome of good, as they embodied those traits typically valued by Western cultures. Iraq and her agents, by contrast, figured as evil.93 Both to gain the public’s support for war and encourage soldiers to engage in corporate action, governments must dehumanize the enemy and make him altogether Other. As psychologist
Bandura asserts, “When dealing with individuals who have been deprived of their humanness, people seldom condemn punitive conduct, and they create justifications for it.”

Indeed, the dehumanizing of the Iraqi people served as a necessary element in the construction of Iraq as a war against evil. Such dehumanizing took shape, first, against Saddam Hussein, who was deemed a tyrant and likened to Osama bin Laden, and, second, from the belief in what Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin call “the threatening strangeness of the Muslim Other.”

This Othering was frequently manifested through American soldiers’ use of the term hajji, which functioned in contemporary wartime culture much like gook or Charlie during the Vietnam War or Kraut or Jap did during World War II.

Appearing frequently in films, literature, and even news articles about the Iraq War, the term hajji served to dismiss, denigrate, and dehumanize Iraqis. The Oxford English Dictionary provides a value-neutral definition of hajji—“the title given to one who has made the greater pilgrimage to Mecca”—and, in Middle Eastern cultures, the term operates as an honorific. As used by American soldiers, however, hajji carries a negative connotation. In his “U.S. Military Lingo: the (Almost) Definitive Guide,” Ben Brody defines hajji as “a derogatory term for Iraqis, used widely during the Iraq War.”

David Buchanan goes further, arguing that hajji “conflates any brown person with all Arabs and all terrorists, leaving no room for individuals, no space for varying religions or ethnic backgrounds or any other human nuance.”

U.S. soldiers’ deployment of the word distorts the original religious meaning: as Buchanan writes, “With its origins in Islam and its misappropriation in representations of Operation Iraqi Freedom, hajji operates as a multipurpose sign carrier for the Orient or for the stereotypical jihadist Muslim, the same terror-laden crusader who flew airplanes into buildings in New York and Washington D.C.
over ten years ago.” Thus this single term stands in for a proprietor serving lunch in a Baghdad restaurant as well as a bomb-planter hiding out in a house in Ramadi.

Klay’s text employs the epithet *hajji* to illustrate the harmful acts of Othering conducted by American soldiers and Marines during the course of the war in Iraq. In some instances the term serves as a dehumanizing catch-all for the enemy. When a team of American soldiers raids an insurgent hideout in “Frago,” one of the men “fires a burst of 5.56 into hajji’s face” (18). Even as they try to save the man’s life, they still talk about him in a demeaning way: “Hajji’s bad. It looks like half the jaw is gone” (20). The use of *hajji* in place of a proper noun (suggested by “hajji” as opposed to “the hajji”) serves to distance the narrator and the man his fellow soldier has shot. Half of “the jaw” is gone, rather than half of “his jaw,” where “his” would serve as a more personal and human descriptor. At other times, soldiers use *hajji* to mock or deride the Iraqis. In “After Action,” Timhead’s squad members call the teenager he shoots (and whom they think Ozzie has shot) “‘the insurgent’ or ‘the hajji’ or ‘the dumbshit hajji,’ as in, ‘You are one lucky motherfucker, getting fired on by the dumbest dumbshit hajji in the whole fucking country’” (32). Here the term serves as belittlement of the Iraqi boy at the same time as it incorporates him into a larger faceless group. “Prayer” offers perhaps the most disturbing iteration of the word’s usage. Disillusioned and disgusted by the death he sees all around him in Ramadi, a young Marine tells his unit’s chaplain, “‘The only thing I want to do is kill Iraqis….That’s it. Everything else is just, numb it until you can do something. Killing hajjis is the only thing that feels like doing something. Not just wasting time.’” When the chaplain corrects him—“‘Insurgents, you mean,’”—the Marine says, “‘They’re all insurgents’” (“Prayer” 148). In his inability, or perhaps outright refusal, to differentiate one Iraqi from another, the
Marine illustrates the terrible power of *hajji* (and here, with it, *insurgent*) to subsume all Iraqis under a banner of vilification and scorn.

While *Redeployment* constructs the Iraqi as Other through the figure of the *hajji*, the stories also challenge the idea of the Iraqi as evil and inhuman through a cast of secondary characters who resist rhetorical binaries and easy categorization. Indeed, a varied cast of secondary characters contributes to the rich texture of *Redeployment*’s stories: in Iraq, children and teenagers, a water plant manager, a professor-turned-translator, a women’s initiative advisor from the U.S., a bumbling American businessman; in the United States, a college student recently converted to Islam, the parents of a Coptic Christian soldier, female strippers, and a twentysomething playwright, among others. Many of these characters bring nuance to the book’s portrait of insurgents, everyday Iraqis, and Muslims, as their characterization troubles the rhetorical binaries that animated much Iraq War discourse in the U.S. before and during the war. Through the portrayal of these various characters, the collection complicates the black-and-white thinking inherent to Iraq War discourse and the popular use of terms such as *hajji* and undermines simplistic dichotomies such as guilt vs. innocence. In so doing, *Redeployment* belies modes of thinking about the Other that injure not only the one being represented but also the one who employs such modes.

Klay uses the figure of the teenager to humanize the enemy and highlight similarities between Americans and Iraqis, strategies that complicate discursive constructions of Iraqi otherness and highlight American moral injury. In “After Action,” Timhead disavows responsibility for the shooting and struggles to come to terms with his killing of the Iraqi boy. Talking to the narrator, Ozzie, a week later, he remembers “‘the kid’s face’” (“After Action” 41). The reference to the face points to Timhead’s perception of the boy not as some random enemy,
lost amongst a great crowd of others, but as an individual with a personality and emotions—
those intimate things that a face conveys. Perhaps his registering of the boy as a human being is
one of the reasons Timhead is so tormented by the killing: as Hedges argues, “A soldier who is
able to see the humanity of the enemy makes a troubled and ineffective killer.”

Despite the seriousness of the teen’s weapon and his violent actions, a number of elements trouble the
immediate assignment of labels such as “evil” and “terrorist” to him. First, the boy’s age, which
the narrator identifies as thirteen or fourteen in the shooting scene, and his ineptitude at firing the
weapon indicate that he is not really the Marines’ true enemy but more likely some “kid [who]
grabbed his dad’s AK when he saw us standing there and thought he’d be a hero and take a
potshot at the Americans” (“After Action” 32). The boy appears more like an imprudent and
intrepid child bent on showing off than a calculating terrorist engaged in jihad. Ozzie reads the
boy’s behavior as rooted in impulse and romantic notions of glory, not a long-developed plan
and deep-seated hatred.

The boy’s young—and indefinite—age raises the question of his culpability for shooting
at the Marines, a question that weighs heavily on Timhead and serves, at least partially, as the
source of his moral injury. Mulling over the incident more than a week after it takes place,
Timhead asks Ozzie, “‘How old do you think that kid I shot was?’”

“Old enough,” [Ozzie] said.

“For what?”

“Old enough to know that it’s a bad fucking idea to shoot at U.S. Marines.”

(“After Action” 40)

Ozzie forwards a theory of culpability that falls in line with much American thinking on the
subject. According to Laurence Steinberg, “The judicial system of the United States treats
adolescents who have committed serious crimes more harshly than any other industrialized country.” Even so, in the past ten years, a series of Supreme Court cases have banned or limited the use of capital punishment and life without parole as punishment for juveniles convicted of serious felonies. “The Court’s decisions,” writes Steinberg, have been increasingly influenced by findings from studies of brain development to support the position that adolescents are less mature than adults in ways that mitigate their criminal culpability, and that adolescents’ diminished blameworthiness makes it inappropriate to sentence them in ways that are reserved for individuals who are deemed fully responsible for their criminal acts.

Brain maturation, including the area responsible for impulse control, does not begin its final stages until at least age sixteen, and some experts believe the process continues through age twenty or even as late as twenty-five. Timhead appears concerned that the Iraqi boy might not possess the culpability of a legitimate enemy, a real bad guy—the implication being, then, that he should not have paid for his offense in blood. Timhead tells Ozzie, “‘My little brother’s in juvie….He’s sixteen….He set a couple fires….That’s some dumb shit. But he’s a kid, right?’” In bringing up his younger brother who is only a “kid,” Timhead gestures toward the Iraqi boy’s diminished capacity for blame. The boy was no doubt acting stupidly, but that does not mean he was acting maliciously—and the appropriate punishment for these two types of offenses differs.

Timhead’s characterization of boys’ behavior establishes a notion of childhood that challenges the idea of Iraqis as Other. In an attempt to ameliorate his friend’s feelings of guilt, Ozzie responds, “‘Sixteen’s only three years younger than me,’” but Timhead asserts, “‘Three years is a big difference….I was crazy when I was sixteen. Besides, my brother did it when he was fifteen’” (“After Action” 40). In referencing his younger self as well as his brother, Timhead
establishes children’s “dumb” behavior in general terms. Dumb actions, even violent ones, such as setting fires or shooting a weapon at soldiers, are not the sole province of some incomprehensible Other; American children are just as capable of behaving badly. The boy in the street could have been Timhead’s brother (or perhaps even Timhead) just as easily as the Iraqi teen if the setting had been different. Moreover, Timhead’s characterization of his brother’s actions as “dumb,” not evil, can be extended to the Iraqi boy’s behavior. Of the numerous ways the Iraq War was sold to the American people, it was not touted as a fight against stupidity—but the Iraqi boy may have lost his life as the result of what was merely a stupid decision and one that, possibly, he was not mature enough to make. He acted, not out of some radical evil but rather out of the impulsive carelessness of childhood, with which Timhead can easily relate. In the aftermath of the incident, Timhead experiences the moral injury that accompanies killing not some inhuman Other but instead an individual who seems all too human and recognizable.

By developing a family narrative around the Iraqi teenager, the story further reinforces the complex moral terrain of war that exists when human beings, and not merely ideas, are at stake. In addition to the father, Ozzie mentions the boy’s mother, “who ran out to try to pull her son back into the house…[but] came just in time to see bits of him blow out of his shoulders” (“After Action” 32). The story thus positions the boy within the orbit of the family unit and as the object of familial love. Timhead insists that what bothers him most about the shooting is that the boy’s “‘family was there. Right there.’” He then remembers “‘[b]rothers and sisters in the window’” watching the scene and, in particular, a younger sister, “‘like nine years old,’” close to the age of Timhead’s own little sister. Timhead’s dwelling on the boy’s family underscores his feelings of empathy, which, as Rajini Srikanth observes, occurs when “[o]ne recognizes the complex realities of others’ lives and subjectivities and the inextricability of one’s world with
By placing the Iraqi boy within a network of fully imagined family members, “After Action” rejects notions of the enemy that simplify and vilify him, that, as Chris Hedges says, “transfor[m him] into the personification of an unmitigated evil.” Instead, the boy is the hapless child of a grieving mother, the foolish but beloved brother of a distraught sister, just as any American child in similar circumstances might be. In thinking of his own brother and sister in relation to the Iraqi boy, Timhead creates a human connection between himself and the teen, which the story further underscores through Timhead’s continued struggle over the shooting, even in the face of Ozzie’ assertion, “‘He was trying to kill you. Us. He was trying to kill everybody’” (“After Action” 40–41).

War’s moral complexity is again on display in “Psychological Operations,” which pits a deceitful American military against minor Iraqi insurgents as a means of complicating notions of good vs evil. In this story, Waguih tells of his team’s taunting of Laith al-Tawid, leader of a small band of insurgents who ultimately heads a suicide charge against the Marines, by goading him with insults about his wife and daughters. Recognizing that the submission and virtue of women is central to al-Tawid’s honor, Waguih concocts a plan to draw him out of hiding: for an hour, Waguih shouts insults about al-Tawid’s daughters “whoring themselves out to American soldiers,” saying “that we’d fuck his daughters on the roof and put their mouths to the loudspeaker so he could hear their screams” and, “when his daughters bent down to pray, we’d put our shoes on their heads and rape them in the ass. Rub our foreskins on their faces. A thousand dicks in your religion…and in forty minutes, a thousand American dicks in your daughters’” (“Psychological” 209). The narrator chooses the insults he knows will most humiliate and shame—and thus provoke—his opponent, “every word calibrated for maximum harm” (212). Though smart and effective, the military’s means of drawing out al-Tawid smacks
of dishonor and foul play. Even Waguih’s super pro-war father feels disgusted by his son’s behavior, preferring instead that his son had “shot them in the face” (210), because the honorable way to kill a man is through facing him directly. Al-Tawid’s refusal to accept the demeaning of his daughters does not stray so far from American notions of pride and honor, and the story thus questions just how evil his attack on the Americans really is.

Moreover, the unclear nature of al-Tawid’s insurgency challenges the war on terror and war of liberation narratives. When Waguih relates the story to his father, the older man is quick to liken al-Tawid’s group to al-Qaeda; the narrator, however, immediately corrects him: “No. Just desert fucks who didn’t like having Americans roaming around in their country” (“Psychological” 207–08). The gap between, on the one hand, “an international terrorist network” that “seeks to rid Muslim countries of what it sees as the profane influence of the West and replace their governments with fundamentalist Islamic regimes”—as the Council on Foreign Relations explains al-Qaeda—and, on the other hand, a group of Iraqis who dislike the American military’s physical presence on their land is, to say the least, quite vast. Central to al-Tawid’s project is a grab for or consolidation of local power, which includes gaining and maintaining the respect of those individuals located in his immediate area: the narrator shouts at him, “You think fighting us will win your honor, but we have your daughters….There is no honor.” (“Psychological” 210). Perhaps al-Tawid wants to gain honor by destroying the Christian infidels—in which case Waguih’s comment would reinforce the war on terror narrative—but he could also gain honor simply by expelling foreign invaders from his homeland. The text provides no evidence one way or another, which leaves unsubstantiated the notion that al-Tawid’s group is connected to a larger terror network bent on jihad. Indeed, by ridding the world of al-Tawid, how much have the narrator and U.S. military really helped the war effort and the Iraqi people?
Waguih admits that al-Tawid’s was but one of “a hundred little insurgent groups, a hundred little local chiefs trying to grab power” (210), and Al-Tawhid did not appear to be presenting any imminent threat to the military—or possibly anyone—at the time that he was killed. This fact also presents a challenge to the war of liberation narrative. The Americans are able to eliminate al-Tawid’s group because they know his name and thus can target him directly, but innumerable other insurgent groups remain, leaving a still unstable political situation in the region. Moreover, al-Tawid’s response to the American military belies claims of liberation, since he and his men view the Americans as intruders on Iraqi soil. Far from welcoming the American presence, al-Tawid and his men resent and act against it. Furthermore, though other Iraqis do not take up arms against the Americans, there exists the possibility that they, too, view the Americans as an imposing presence rather than liberators, and Waguih never explains how the locals felt about al-Tawid and his group.

“Psychological Operations” utilizes two American characters to complicate notions of Islam and Arabs and thereby challenge American conceptions of the Other. A black freshman at the overwhelmingly white Amherst College, Zara Davies begins the story as “aggressive, combative, and lovely,” dressed in skintight jeans and a wide brass belt buckle, a thin yellow t-shirt, and brown suede boots,“ with hair worn “natural, braided in the front with an Afro puff at the back” (“Psychological” 169, 170). At this point Zara is a fellow student in the narrator’s Punishment, Politics, and Culture course, where she eagerly shares her fiery opinions with the class, such as when she asks the narrator, “‘Who cares what the soldiers believe? It doesn’t matter what the pawns on a chessboard think about how and why they’re being played’” (171). By the time of the story’s present action, however, Zara has undergone a change; she has converted to Islam, a difference most immediately and obviously registered in her physical
presentation: in place of her modern American clothing, Zara now wears “a long brown dress that went all the way down her legs to a rather disappointing pair of flats,” and a shawl hides her hair. Despite this move toward modesty, Zara still stands out among the other women on campus, most of whom “are walking around with half [their] tits exposed” (172). Beyond the physical, Zara’s conversion registers in her attitude and bearing; while she remains firm in her convictions, calm and levelheadedness have largely replaced her former sass and sharpness.

Zara serves as a foil to the Christian Waguih and also as a counter to simplistic American stereotypes of Muslims. The story’s inciting incident occurs when Zara wrongly assumes that Waguih is Muslim because of his Arab physical appearance:

“How could you kill your own people?” she said.

“They’re not my people,” I said.

“We’re all one people,” she said….

“I’m not Muslim,” I said….

“I’m a Copt,” I said, and since that never elicits any reaction, I added, “Coptic Orthodox Church. Egyptian Christians.” (173)

In American culture, Muslims are typically stereotyped as Arabs and vice versa, even though the largest portion of the world’s Muslim population hails from outside of the Middle East, in Indonesia. Though Waguih is of Arab heritage, he is a Christian, and it is Zara, the black woman, who is Muslim. During the same conversation, Waguih asserts, “Muslims hate us….There are riots sometimes. Like the pogroms in Russia against Jews….So you see, I can kill Muslims as much as I like….Shit, in my religion, that’s how you help an angel get its wings” (173–74). Contrary to dominant Western stereotypes of Islam as a religion of violence, Waguih, the Christian, remarks crassly about killing Muslims, in a sort of mock Christian-jihad statement.
Zara, though offended and potentially frightened, does not respond in kind; she takes her grievance to the university’s Special Assistant, who calls a meeting of the two students. When Waguih tells Zara and the Special Assistant a sad war story (consisting primarily of lies) to avoid punishment, the formerly feisty Zara feels sympathy and apologizes to him. Though she is not a long-time devotee of Islam, Zara’s conversion has cultivated in her more mature, caring, and reflective qualities, rendering her far from the stereotypical Muslim who is “liable to be whipped into a frenzy at the least disturbance to [her] unchanging backward worldview.” Waguih, by contrast, becomes incensed at her pity, and after the meeting he chases her across the lawn to insist that she listen to his real war story.

Zara’s agreement to listen to Waiguh’s story and her behavior during the time she spends on his porch undercut the Western notion of the violent, single-minded Muslim. According to Douglas Pratt and Rachel Woodlock, “It is now part of a Western consciousness that Islam and Muslims pose a threat: to freedom of speech, to the role of women, to the security of the state, to secularism, to community cohesion, to the imagined ‘Western’ way of life.” But if Zara poses a threat to Waguih, it is only because she forces him to reflect on his past in a way he would rather not. While she challenges the narrator, taking him to task for shooting teenagers, calling the U.S. military’s killing of Iraqis “murder” (“Psychological” 186), etc., she never shuts down the lines of communication but rather encourages discourse. For example, when Waguih describes watching a kid die in the street, Zara asks, “‘Why’d you look?’” and, though “[h]er voice was hard, accusing,” she never pronounces judgment on what he says. She continues to ask him questions throughout the conversation and later says, “‘Tell your story’” (200), as a way to urge things along. Although much of what Waguih says contradicts Zara’s beliefs and offends her sensibilities, she maintains an openness and willingness to listen—something Waguih would
not likely return if roles were reversed, given that he, not she, is the only one who interrupts while the other is speaking (198).

The liberated and articulate Zara also subverts the image of the oppressed Muslim woman that proliferates in Western popular culture. Though much more subdued than before her conversion, Zara still asserts her opinions clearly, as when she expresses shock that Waguih’s father has hit him or disgust over the insult campaign that drew teenagers from the mosques. Her commentary on her decision to wear the hijab helps to dispel conceptions of the veil as “necessarily an oppression for Muslim women.”114 Zara explains, “‘It’s part of the commitment….Wearing this, people treat me like I’ve made a change in my life. Which I have….That matters’” (“Psychological” 194). No one has forced Zara to dress in this way; rather she has chosen her new attire, perhaps, as so many Muslim women worldwide do, out of “a sense of pride in being Muslim, a collective sense of identity or to convey a sense of self-control in public life.”115 Further, while Zara cites smoking the hookah as a violation of Amherst’s honor code, she nonetheless partakes in the activity, confirming her inclusion in the college community and participation in typical college life. Even her presence on Waguih’s porch subverts the notion of the Muslim woman who is controlled by her male relatives. That Zara has chosen Islam, and against her father’s wishes—he calls it “the religion of poor blacks” (“Psychological” 193)—as opposed to having the practice foisted upon her by virtue of geography or family, makes a case for her agency and for reading the Muslim woman as a liberated Westerner rather than oppressed Other.

Waguih’s father likewise complicates Redeployment’s portrayal of the Other, as “Psychological Operations” employs him to figuratively bring the Arab Other home. When airport security pulls the father aside because of his appearance and “Arab-sounding” name, he
loudly proclaims, “‘‘I know you get a lot of flak, but I want you guys to know I support what you’re doing. You are protecting our American freedoms’’” (“Psychological” 195). He aggressively supports the U.S. in the post-9/11 climate, becoming “‘…Mr. Uber-America [with] flags flying at our house, and “Support Our Troops” magnets all over the bumper of his car’” (194–95). But the father’s appearance stands at odds with conventional notions of an American: the narrator describes his father as “‘darker than me and he’s got that Arab dictator mustache thing going on. He looks exactly like Saddam Hussein’” (194). The father refuses to shave the mustache because it is “‘a manhood thing,’” and the narrator even wonders if it is “‘a giant “fuck you.” Maybe not to America, but to Americans, you know? All those God-fearing assholes who talk Jesus but don’t know that true Christianity is the Coptic Church’” (194, 198). Beyond looking like the Iraqi dictator, the father’s aggressive, bullish behavior carries over into his personal life. After a kid in high school called Waguih a “sand nigger,” the father hit Waguih for only yelling at the kid instead of fighting him (192–93). Waguih’s father fails to conform to any preconceived schema of good guy or bad guy: he is hyper pro-America yet resolute in his Arab appearance, Christian yet hot-tempered. His son’s service in the U.S. military is his greatest point of pride and seemingly their single connection in a relationship defined by conflict. Yet Waguih’s underhanded tactics in the confrontation with Laith al-Tawid disgust the father and lead finally to the destruction of the father-son relationship. In his physical person, the father brings the Other home, just as Klay, through his stories, brings the Iraq War home to America.

**Conclusion**

In understanding the U.S. as a country suffering from the moral injuries of a complex war and its complex aftermath, narrative offers a particularly powerful tool for recovery: as Shay
argues, “healing from trauma depends upon communalization of the trauma—being able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community” (emphasis added). Truthfully telling the Iraq War’s story—its many, varied stories—will no doubt be a complicated, fraught process, as soldier and citizen endeavor to move beyond harmful and simplistic discursive structures in which American thinking has become deeply entrenched. Such a telling will require the dismantling of old assumptions, the rethinking of tired attitudes, and the willingness of all, as Klay says, to get their “hands dirty.”

Redeployment takes a first step in this direction, offering the war through twelve different voices, each telling a story with the power to break but, also, to heal.

The fact that American society has for so long averted its eyes and closed its ears to the difficult stories of the Iraq War does not mean the nation has succumbed to irreparable moral damage. Speaking of soldiers, Bret Litz et al. explain that “injury is only possible if acts of transgression produce dissonance (conflict), and dissonance is only possible if the service member has an intact moral belief system.” Indeed, a definition of moral injury depends upon “the supposition that anguish, guilt, and shame are signs of an intact conscience and self- and other-expectations about goodness, humanity, and justice.” Such logic can be extended to the United States as a whole, which ignores and denies the war’s shameful acts and unscrupulous deeds precisely because they are out of concert with the values and ideals toward which the nation strives: equality, integrity, freedom, respect. Because such unsavory behavior induces dissonance within U.S. culture-at-large, the nation, it seems, possesses the potential to repair itself. The country, however, cannot remain content with some foundational narrative of exceptionality or easy belief in its own goodness. Rather, Redeployment asks the United States to listen to the stories its soldiers have to tell—stories rife with ugliness, violence, cruelty,
considerable pain, stories that belong rightly not only to those who served but also to the country who sent them in its name—and to begin the difficult process of revision, united. Only by doing this difficult work together can soldier and civilian write a new narrative for their nation’s future.

Notes

3 Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 215. Hereafter, references to Klay’s collection will be cited parenthetically in text by story name (or abbreviated story name) and page number.
7 Qtd. in Jeff Severns Guntzel, “Beyond PTSD to ‘Moral Injury,’” *Public Insight Network*, February 19, 2013, accessed December 5, 2016, https://www.publicinsightnetwork.org/2013/02/19/beyond ptsd to moral injury/. In his original formulation of the concept, Shay located the betrayal of what is right in a superior; he uses Agamemnon’s wrongful taking of Briseis from Achilles as an extended example and the starting point for his book *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994).
13 I qualify the use of this term because some of the stories—“In Vietnam They Had Whores,” for instance—seem not completely like “aftermath” stories but more like “in-the-midst-of-things” stories, since the protagonist is on leave and will return to the war shortly.
16 The following commentary can also be applied to the war in Afghanistan.
Another important characteristic of the contemporary era is the tendency for soldiers to deploy repeatedly, as discussed below. Stories of Iraq/Afghanistan War soldiers on their fourth, fifth, or greater deployment are not uncommon.


Carter and Barno, “Gated Communities.”


Ibid.


Multiple deployments were not, of course, always voluntary, as the DoD frequently enforced the stop-loss policy that prevented service members from separating from the military at the end of their contracts. Being forced to continue their service, however, is unlikely to engender feelings of understanding on the part of soldiers toward the civilian.


Ibid., 698.

Manguen and Litz, “Context of War.”


Manguen and Litz, “Context of War.”


Ibid.

Castner, “Profanity of War.”

Scranton, “Trauma Hero.”

Qtd. in Conan, “The Psychological Wounds of War.”


Ibid.
Debut Collection

The Things They Carried

This, of course, is a generalization. Authors of memoir can, and do, utilize any point of view. Mary Karr, for example, employs the second-person point of view throughout Cherry, as does Laura Fraser in An Italian Affair; Nick Flynn uses third person for sections of his memoir, Another Bullshit Night in Suck City, and Marilyn Abildskov uses both second and third person in The Men in My Country.


I do not mean to disregard the fact that the collection focuses entirely on the American male military experience. Rebecca Bengal writes, “This isn’t a book that aims for a diversity of perspective—each and every story is told from a male point of view,” and gender is not the only issue. “Psychological Operations” is the only story narrated by a female point of view, and gender is not the only issue. “Psychological Operations” is the only story narrated by a female point of view. To my knowledge, none of the protagonists in the collection is a secondary character (Jobrani, “After War/"

Another Bullshit Night in Suck City

Heart of Darkness

Lord Jim

Mapping Contemporary American War Culture, College Literature 43.1 (Winter 2016): 64.

Ibid., 101.

Ibid., 101.

Ibid., 261.

WMDs, IEDs, DHS.”

Sherman, Afterwar, 63.


By my count the piece comprises 905 words, 88 of which are actual acronyms, as opposed to simply abbreviations.


Ibid., 261.

Aubrey Neal explains that Berger and Luckmann built on Saussure’s structuralist ideas of language.

Patrick Deer calls it “a Conradian anxiety” about storytelling, gesturing toward Joseph Conrad’s experiments in storytelling. Another Bullshit Night in Suck City


Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society Rev. ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), 260.

Ibid., 261.

Metafiction


Waugh, Metafiction, 2.

Ibid., 101.

Ibid., 101.

Ibid., 101.

Ibid., 101.
Martin Napersteck asserts that it is as “part novel, part collection of stories, part essays, part journalism; it is, more significantly, all at the same time” (“An Interview with Tim O’Brien,” *Contemporary Literature* 32 [Spring 1991]: 1). O’Brien himself, in interviews, has deemed the work “fiction…a novel,” and then, at a later date, called it a “sort of half novel, half group of stories. It’s part nonfiction, too.” Elizabeth Mehren, “Short War Stories,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1990, E1; Napersteck, “An Interview with Tim O’Brien,” 7. I read *Things* as a collection of stories, and the publication acknowledgements on the copyright page identify the individual works as stories.


Calloway, “‘How to Tell,’” 251.


Ibid., 10.

Ogle, “Interview.”

Silbergleid, “Autobiographical Metafiction,” 137. In many stories, narrator-O’Brien relates a story in which character-O’Brien plays a part. In “In the Field,” however, a limited third-person narrator tells the story of character-Tim O’Brien as well as Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and other men in the platoon. Thus the character and narrator are not always synonymous with one another.

Matt Gallagher, “An Interview.”


Ibid., 119.

Ibid., 128.

Ibid., 171

Ibid., 171–72.

Ibid., 172.

Silbergleid, “Autobiographical Metafiction,” 146 and 147.


Ibid., 81.


Singer counts more than one thousand references to evil in Bush’s speeches from his inauguration in 2001 until June 2003, *President of Good and Evil*, 2.

Ivie, “The Rhetoric of Bush’s War on Evil.”


Lakoff, “Metaphor and War, Again.”


Buchanan, “Hajji Mall,” 5.

Ibid.


Steinberg, “The Influence of Neuroscience,” 513.


Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims*, 1.


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