Preparation For The Next Life — What We Want Is Not What We Will Get

 After war, most societies look for love. Instead of dealing with the various manifest issues that remain after years of chaos and wanton murder, they seek the understanding and hope that can only be provided by stories based on faith, something greater than the brutal logic of expedience. A certain type of story presents love as a gift to the audience, a sanctuary from the tension brought about by strife, a coherent conclusion. A happy ending. It seems, from reviews of *Preparation for the Next Life*, as well as the recent reception of *American Sniper* and the relationship between Chris Kyle and his wife that forms its logical heart, that many Americans feel that they deserve such a story as well.

Preparation for the Next Life is not about love — it's a terrifically clever and realistic accounting of the ways in which people seek escape from life at the bottom of a capitalist society. The plot's logic depends in part on offering readers the catharsis of a conventional love story, then switching the terms of the bargain without losing any momentum. By the time readers realize that *Preparation for the Next Life* uses love like toreadors use their capes, it's too late. And instead of salvation, readers encounter a tragic tale of poverty and paucity that leads into a scathing indictment of the choices Western culture has made over at least the last fourteen years. More, if one counts Chinese communism, itself a product of Western culture.

There are two main characters in *Preparation for the Next Life*. The first to whom readers are introduced is Zhou Lei, an ethnic Uighur from the northwest of China. The Uighurs are Muslims, and the ethnic (Han) Chinese tend to dislike or hate

them, which leads to her being alienated in her own country. Zhou travels from the type of crippling poverty one encounters in the third world to America (land of opportunity), where she is still viewed as an outsider by the predominantly Han Chinese immigrants. Despite the many hardships in her background, Zhou is defined by an inexhaustibly optimistic nature. This optimism draws its power from the myths her mother tells her when she's a child, and is framed logically by her father, who believes in 60's-style nationalistic, pro-Chinese propaganda. It's interesting to see how easily this propaganda fits into Zhou's idea of herself succeeding in the context of Western capitalism, as well.

The book abounds with stories and myths that the characters hear, and which they tell each other — they form the novel's life-blood, and are simultaneously vital to the plot and empty of all meaning. The myths that Zhou Lei's mother tells her, for example, serve as touchstones that readers can follow like signposts throughout the narrative. In one, offered in the beginning of the book, Zhou's mother explains that distant mountains conceal a land of plenty. Much later in the book, a tired, hungry, and distressed Zhou finds herself talking with an Uzbek Afghan grocer, who has seen the same mountains from his native country of Afghanistan. The Uzbek offers her food and water, and Zhou experiences momentary relief, which leads nowhere. In another of Zhou's mother's myths, a girl travels to the faraway land of plenty with nothing but seven seeds to sustain her. The girl burns her feet while traveling over an iron desert, but makes it through to a blue river, where she's healed. The occurrence of blue and injured feet later on in the book at various points offer useful guideposts on Zhou's actual journey — or, at least, gives readers a sense of how she views a given situation; in keeping with the book's relentless realism, these signifiers are logical to the narrative and unto themselves, but don't actually deliver any more profound truth.
.

The next character readers meet is Brad Skinner, a former bodybuilder who joined the military after 9/11, and served three tours of duty in Iraq with the U.S. Army Infantry, including during the invasion. His background, delivered in the third person, states that the impulse behind joining was the terrorist attack on the twin towers — but it's more complex than that: *"9/11 was the big reason, but he would have gone anyway, just to do something."*

Skinner is surely one of the more complex veteran characters to emerge in contemporary literature. It would be a mistake to say simply that he is a broken veteran of the Iraq War, or suffers from PTSD — while both are undeniably true in the context of the text, they simplify and reduce his essential characteristics in a way that diminishes his experiences. The character readers encounter isn't a fundamentally decent man, twisted and misshapen by war — he's a savvy, emotionally manipulative adolescent who has been allowed to hide his defects behind his service, and attempts to do so immediately, as well as throughout the text. Skinner understands the archetype he's playing — the "war hero" — and he cynically exploits expected civilian reactions to this type, again and again, describing himself as a veteran whenever he senses that the listener could be sympathetic to such an introduction. We meet him on the road into New York City, having hitched a ride from a very tolerant trucker after leaving the military — after acting like an entitled jerk and getting kicked out at the first gas station possible, Skinner walks into the city and attempts to pick up one of the first women he meets:

"I just got here, literally like an hour ago. Two hours ago. We could have a drink or something and you could tell me about yourself."

"Thank you, no."

"You sure? I just got out of the army yesterday. I literally just got here. All I want to do is buy you a drink to say

thank you. Howbout it? I mean, you're not talkin' to a bad person."

"I realize that."

He moves on from this rejection, which he handles with characteristic irritation, Skinner heads to a patriotic bar. There, patrons buy him drinks for his service. Despite a desire on the part of readers to, maybe, see Skinner as a good person exposed to the horrors of war (and he *was* exposed to the horrors of war), few soldiers or veterans act, consistently, the way Skinner does — he's been written this way to a purpose, and that purpose, when one reads the entire novel, is a subtle repudiation of the debatable notion that moral injuries sustained in combat lead inexorably to bad ends. Sometimes injury and moral injury does lead to tragic decisions, but more often, as pointed out by thinkers like Nietzsche and Jung, moral injury from war leads to good and decent men growing and expanding — undertaking political service, as in the Greatest Generation, or literary works, as in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*. Skinner is a different breed.

The physical descriptions of war arrive through Skinner's dreams, or shaded recollections, and tend toward the surreal. They feel authentic — the way one sees vivid experiences from the past, unmediated by the conscious mind — especially in the beginning of the deployment: "*They crossed paths with other units, soldiers who had been in heavy house-to-house fighting and there was a bad feeling, like they wanted to hurt somebody and you were it.*" As time goes on in the war, readers experience combat like an especially urgent impressionistic painting in which Skinner has become trapped: "*In the arc-weld light, solid forms appeared to shift — the hanging dust. Shadows were running. The drilling deafening thundering never stopped. The razor lights leapt straight across the black, flashed past — he whipped his head around — and they went away and went arcing slowly down like baseballs. The ground and the*

air were being shocked." He loses friends, and (at least at first) dreads his memories of those experiences — until later in the book, when, thoroughly in the grip of the delusion that war can provide some sort of balm for his aching soul, he dreams of the war as a happier place, a time of fellowship and shared purpose.

There's no question that Skinner has encountered severe moral injury based on what he sees and does in combat. He murders civilians, for one thing, and photographs them in awful positions for another — he is a war criminal, in other words, the lowest, most thuggish level of war criminal, but a criminal nevertheless, and carries PTSD. But the ravages of that awful psychological disorder — from which so many veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer — do not explain or excuse his actions in the middle and end of the book. No — in *Preparation for the Next life,* Skinner's choices, in and out of war, belong to him.

The relationship between Zhou Lei and Skinner is complicated, and depends in equal parts what each character represents to the other, which comes down to "escape." Zhou seeks in Skinner a replacement for her father, a sergeant in the Chinese Army who died during one of the collectivization phases of Chinese development in the 70s. To support this dependence on the pro-military narrative in Zhou's life, references to her belief in and admiration for soldiers and the military abound. She claims to have "military training" and admires the trappings of Skinner's service — his military gear, his camouflage, his boots. She does not, however, understand Skinner, and by the time his PTSD manifests and he begins acting as selfishly as he feels, she's trapped with an emotionally abusive, self-destructive adolescent. To Skinner's credit, he often describes precisely what is important to him — his war, his pistol, his dream of one day returning to Iraq — rather than concealing his ambitions. Although he usually talks about the return to combat as a way to make money, it is

quite clearly a dream to destroy himself, for a variety of reasons. Whether Zhou Lei willfully misunderstands Skinner, or it is simply a misunderstanding based on her desire for what he represents is left to the reader. For Skinner's part, he sees Zhou Lei as a sexual object most of the time, and, as time goes on and his condition worsens, alternately as a source of stability and a burden of which to be rid at any cost, until the book's unforgettable and dramatic conclusion.

This fixation on superficial aspects of love helps explain an otherwise curious phenomenon wherein physical fitness correlates with moral health. This, alongside Zhou Lei's idea of soldiers as a sort of ideal, is the most prevalent strand running through the book: immoral or insane characters project internal dissatisfaction through broken bodies, while moral or decent characters do the same through near-religious attendance to working out. Here's one of the primary characters exercising at a public park, in a scene of retreat that evokes Faulkner, Hemingway, and Hawthorne: "*Skinner was doing pushups with his boots up on a ledge. When he was done, he had trouble standing up. He sat down and did nothing for quite a while, just sat at the bottom of a slide, his chin dripping, looking down at the sweat drips falling between his fingers. When he looked up, he saw a pit bull, a beautiful powerful animal with tight glossy skin over striated muscles…*" The primary antagonist, on the other hand, "*looked like a white meaty insect whose exoskeleton has been peeled away exposing the mechanical workings of muscles and white sacks of flesh, which had never been in the open air before.*" The antagonist's family members, too, suffer from physical ailments or deformities that feel linked to the choices they've made in life — the landlady is fat, so much so that she ends up suffering a heart attack. Her daughter, Erin, is described as "giant" when introduced to readers, then again on several occasions. While few would object to the medical assertion that a correlation exists between good health and good spirits (Mr. Carson of this blog argued the contrary

[here]), *Preparation* actually bases part of its moral hierarchy on disciplined workout regimens, or "military training," as Zhou Lei puts it, so much so that the final image in the book is that of a good character preparing to squat more weight than they have ever before attempted. A character's fitness or health does not mean, necessarily, that they are good, or healthy, but the absence of fitness is a sure sign of spiritual poverty. In the context of the book's ostensible theme, then, characters use working out as a replacement for the affection they don't derive from external sources, or as a means of escape from a world over which they otherwise have no control. Working out, according to the logic of the text, is an activity that leads nowhere, and gives its participants nothing beyond temporary respite from a sense of existential terror that runs like rapids throughout the text.

Many people believe that love offers some sort of redemption — a way to balance out the sins of violence, the choices its nation made in war. When Skinner disagrees with Zhou's proposition that love makes the world go round, she challenges him. *"What makes the world go round,"* she says, and Skinner answers: *"War… Actually, I'd say money first. Money and then war."* America, a capitalist society that seems addicted to both money and war, has made serious mistakes in its pursuit of both — like torture, like bullying, like unnecessary violence, like sexual assault, like disastrously unregulated financial markets, all to no apparent end. And as much as readers would like a classic love story to make it all seem okay, that redemptive narrative isn't here for American society in the way that it seemed accessible or deserved after World War II. In the end, after all the struggles, perhaps the best analogy for this book in the western canon would be one a disillusioned Hemingway wrote after The Great War — *A Farewell to Arms*. The sad truth is, there is no transcendent understanding bought when one covets trauma and violence — only more trauma and more violence — a pessimistic, never ending cycle. *Preparation for the Next Life* delivers both, and

in such a way that one cannot help but grow from reading it.

Preparation From the Next Life is by Atticus Lish, published by and available through Tyrant Books.

Top 4 Contributors on Wrath Bearing Tree, 2014

With so much incredible, breakthrough writing happening at The Wrath Bearing Tree this year, the editors wanted to set a moment aside from their around-the-clock analysis of emergent (and urgent) intellectual issues to publish a curated list of the site's best contributors this year.
The editors used number rankings that took a great number of objective variables into account, you may take their word for it. And while the prize was not the gold medals Putin designed and personally crafted for the Sochi Olympics—in fact, it was only the satisfaction of being a part of such a noble and august group—Putin's gold accurately characterizes how, collectively, the editors feel about journalism, truth, Russia, and excellence.

The best medals one could imagine: Russia's "Sochi Gold," a classy picture of victory

and excellence

1) Mr. James — a dependable source of philosophically grounded, inspired literary and social analysis, James proved himself as one of the site's very best contributors.

1) Mr. Carson — indisputably tied for best contributor to the Wrath Bearing Tree, Carson's regular and well-thought-out essays (often too "edgy" for mainstream media outlets, but occasionally not) engaged his readers, and brought crucial attention to serious issues that others lacked the fortitude — or curiosity — to tackle.

1) Mr. Webster — contributed a thoughtful essay about his time in Iraq as an embed with the 82nd — a Wrath Bearing Tree first. This pushed him over the top and into the highest echelon of elite contributors.

1) Mr. Bonenberger — if one were to look for glowing adjectives to describe Bonenberger's work, one could not do better than to begin with the entire group of superlatives. Contributors like him come around once in an age—a golden age.

And there you have it — the top 4 contributors to The Wrath Bearing Tree, 2014. Congratulations to all on an excellent year, and may 2015 be twice as prolific and useful.

Brad Pitt and the Myth of the Wehrmacht

Brad Pitt loves playing in WWII movies. He loves fighting Nazis, who, incredibly, really existed, and were (if anything) even more evil than comes across on a movie screen. For 12

years, one of the most civilized, technologically and institutionally advanced countries on earth was ruled by a brutal, vicious band of thugs who employed racial mythology, sentimentalism, romanticism, emotion, intimidation, and murder in their attempt to extort as much wealth as possible from the populations they ruled. While not the worst catastrophe the world has ever witnessed, to put the Nazis in list terms (the only terms most people understand these days), we're probably talking one of the three all-time worst. Almost certainly bottom five, and indisputably bottom ten.

It's important to frame the list in terms of utility, or effectiveness, so as not to unintentionally make the case that this type of behavior is worthy of praise, or anything other than the most resounding condemnation and rejection. Oftentimes people confuse the intensity or degree of an action with its having some sort of value as an accomplishment, which is completely false. An evil accomplishment is not an accomplishment at all — only a fiend would claim different. Therefore, the Nazis and other misfortunes that humanity have inflicted upon itself such as other brands of totalitarianism or authoritarianism should never occupy the "top" of any list — only the bottom, where they belong.

Having established the terms of what we're talking about — which are critical to the debate — I wanted to weigh in on the topic of *Fury* again, in part because some people read my review and did not understand that I did watch the movie after writing the review based on previews. I watched it for two reasons: first, because when a woman says she wants to watch a war movie for a date, only a churl says: "no." Second, because I'd made the emotional if somewhat foolhardy claim that if *Fury* revealed anything new or fundamentally true about life or war by using different weapons than Saving Private Ryan, I'd boil and eat my leather shoe. I stood by that claim, but not without some trepidation as curtain time approached.

I should have trusted my gut. As composed, *Fury* was a confused

series of cliches (many of which have been described elsewhere at great length) cobbled together around three competing assertions (contained within the protagonist): **one**, that the Nazis and specifically the SS were an antagonist of such manifest evil that to battle and kill them when and wherever possible was the highest possible good, **two**, that America and Americans were essentially different from the Nazis as expressed by the SS, a fact that explained or excused the actions of American soldiers within that context, and **three** that in war, people tend to develop tribes based on their unit — and in a tank, especially a Sherman tank, the weapon itself, the tank, becomes a part of the tribe — a living part of the unit.

Fury billed itself as a "realistic" movie, and a lot of the marketing surrounding the film concerned its attention to detail as well as the importance to the actors and studio that they "get it right," so it's worth discussing how the movie measured up based on those standards. Based on every reliable review I've seen from subject matter experts, the Germans and Americans were outfitted with equipment and weapons appropriate for the time, and those weapons functioned more or less as one would expect. The Americans aren't facing the Wehrmacht of 1941, they're facing militia reserves composed of children and old men, and the ineffectiveness of many German units in the face of American combat power (the missed shots, the shoddy equipment, etc.) can be explained as bad craftsmen misusing their tools. The deaths were realistic — people died characteristically realistically considering the medium, rather than unrealistically.

SPOILER

There is a scene with a Tiger tank that arrives with about 30 minutes left to go in the movie. One understands immediately that in a movie named for a tank, the Tiger will likely not

destroy Fury and then rumble away as the protagonist (played by Brad Pitt), a troubled staff sergeant named Wardaddy, leads his crew to safety. The question becomes whether the American close air support (featured shortly before the tanks roll out) will show up and knock out the Tiger, or whether somehow Fury and the other tanks will outmaneuver the Tiger and knock it out, or some other plausible scenario, for example maybe Brad Pitt knows how to make sticky bombs [like Tom Hanks](). In a brilliant reference to the old GI Joe cartoons, where Cobras would unload battalions worth of firepower on the outgunned and outnumbered Joes, missing every time, the Tiger manages to destroy the other non-Fury tanks, then miss or score glancing hits (from point blank range with AP ammo) on Fury, until Wardaddy has maneuvered the tank behind the Tiger, and scores a direct hit seconds before the Tiger manages to miss again, or score another dramatic near-miss.

BACK TO NON-SPOILER

The presentation of time-appropriate weapons and equipment, and the opening combat sequences, are all very well done, if on the melodramatic side. As time went on, though, the tactics, the strategy, how collections of people tended to move and work on an aggregate and specific level became less and less "realistic," while still purporting to strive for that standard. And this is a shame — if the movie had embraced the surreal, if it had let the "realism" go in favor of something more impressionistic, it could have avoided the absurd, cliched pitfall into which it ended up falling. Instead, it doubled down on its commitment to the narrative, the plot, and those three aforementioned competing assertions, which brings the Sherman tank, Fury, led by Wardaddy, to a crossroads that must be defended at all costs.

META SPOILER

Lest I be seen as a hater (someone who just criticizes success to make myself sound clever or fill some internal insecurity

or bitterness), allow me to propose an alternative movie, which I found to be much closer to the truth about the horrors of war, (if less "realistic") — and which I proposed in my preview review of *Fury — Cross of Iron*. In [the end of *Cross of Iron*, a corrupt and ambitious Prussian Captain wants a Cross of Iron, and follows a heroic enlisted German soldier into a suicidal counterattack](). This action occurs during a Russian assault in which the German unit is being overrun, and the action is remarkably even-handed — Russians and Germans are slaughtered indiscriminately, and heroic actions are presented as tiny tragedies. The protagonist and the Captain are fired upon — by a child — and the Captain can't figure out how to reload his submachine gun. The enlisted German soldier — Steiner, played brilliantly by James Coburn — sees this happen and begins laughing hysterically. The Russian child soldier is so disgusted by the Prussian's incompetence and desperation that he rolls his eyes rather than shooting again. The Prussian officer pathetically puts his helmet on backwards, still without having reloaded his submachine gun while Steiner laughs at the tragic absurdity of it all. From there, the movie cuts to the ending credits a series of stills of an execution carried out by Nazis, Steiner's laughter ringing in our ears. The credits are, collectively, one of the most powerfully damning pieces of evidence against the Nazis I've seen in any movie, ever.

I cannot stress enough how untrue and devastatingly inaccurate — unrealistic — any statement other than the one attempted by Peckinpah is. In order to make something real, there has to be something at stake. *Fury* wagers nothing, and presents the audience with a conclusion that's about as far from *Cross of Iron* as one could get.

META SPOILER COMPLETE — INITIATE SPOILER

At the end of *Fury*, the tank is disabled by a German anti-tank mine, cleverly placed in a piece of key strategic terrain. As it happens, Wardaddy's crew has been tasked with defending

this terrain against a possible German counterattack — they are the only protection remaining between the Germans and an American resupply column. It is an afternoon in April, 1945. One of the tank's crew mans an OP, and discovers, with horror, that a full Battalion of adult male (i.e. veteran) SS panzer grenadier infantry is approaching down the road, singing, marching, panzerfausts at the ready — full of esprit de corps and savage intention, the kind we know is bad because they're SS.

Let's suspend disbelief — I'm sure it's possible such an event like this happened, even near the end of the war. I read a memoir by an [SS infantry officer called *Black Edelweiss*](#) which should be required reading for every young American male, as a cautionary tale of how propaganda and blind nationalism can lead even the best-intentioned young men astray. The author (writing for understandable reasons under the guise of a pseudonym) describes how his unit was shifted from the far north of Finland to Germany in January-February of 1945. Moving at night via ship, train, and foot to avoid being strafed or bombed, the unit was detected during an attack and strafed, bombed, and shelled nearly out of existence before seeing any enemy (American or British) soldiers. The survivors were then sent on a series of increasingly absurd missions, culminating, for the author, in a pointless and near-suicidal defense of a position with a single machine-gun against two Sherman tanks, which coincided with his injury and incarceration.

So this unit of SS infantrymen is moving in formation, singing, near the frontline, down a road, in a place where the Americans have aerial domination (uncontested access to the skies). It seems incredible — but maybe this is just a testament to confidence in their fighting prowess. The soldier at the OP runs back to tell Wardaddy about the situation — 300 enemy veteran soldiers, trucks, vehicles, kitted out to fight. Wardaddy's reaction is to announce that the others

should return to the unit, but that he's carrying out the mission — he's manning Fury, staying with the tank, to repulse the Germans. The other American soldiers in the tank concur that this is a sound and reasonable plan, and they set about prepping for an ambush, in a scene that echoes the ending of Saving Private Ryan.

Now — the ambush and ensuing battle are relatively unimportant, and filled with the type of improbable and ludicrous cinematic excesses one would rightly expect it to contain. The crew guns down Germans as though they were pigeons; for their part, the Germans have inexplicably packed away the Panzerfausts they were carrying in cumbersome boxes. The SS has forgotten to fight, or perhaps never learned — something that would be slightly more believable if the unit were not filled with veteran adults, rather than cannon-fodder children. It's important, vital, even, to note here that every serious military analyst has credited Germany's early battlefield successes and long survival against impossible odds to a marked tactical superiority over their Russian, British, and American foes — the myth that German military success derived from technological superiority is a convenient invention of video game producers, Hollywood, and daytime television hucksters. The truth of the matter is that, outgunned, outproduced, and outmatched in almost every important category, the Germans held on because they outfought their enemies tactically almost everywhere, finding themselves bested occasionally by elite American units in areas like Bastogne, or by Russians at Kursk. Much of WWII was, for the Allies, a function of merely holding on, shelling the Germans with artillery and bombing them while our inferior soldiers made incremental gains against exhausted and increasingly ill-trained conscripts. This is not embarrassing or shameful — we won a modern war against a country attempting to fight along pre-modern lines (using human ingenuity against weapons). On top of which, the Nazis were, as described before, a pack of evil and unscrupulous bullies who needed to be stopped. So —

to come back to the original point — Fury inflicts massive losses on the Germans, who continue to rush the tank rather than flanking it, or doing anything even the most basic military unit knows to do. As a combat-proven, valorously decorated former airborne infantry officer who has seen combat firsthand, I can say this without a shadow of doubt: in reality, the ambush and combat go down very differently from how they are portrayed in the movie.

When Brad Pitt's Wardaddy dies — shot twice, heroically, by a German sniper, then finished off by two grenades dropped into the tank by a final rush by the Germans (their fourth or fifth?) — he is presented like a figure in a [painting by Titian](#) or one of the old masters.

I've thought about why this must've been for some time, why none of it hung together. I mean, sure, anyone who has been to combat and knows how the thing works must find a movie like *Fury* condescending and trite. But why did the director and actors decide to play the movie this way? Why undercut the basic premise that the Germans were a serious, formidable foe? My hypothesis is that Hollywood has been producing these movies for so long that it has actually lost it's understanding of why or how the Nazis and SS were evil. Hollywood and popular culture — which have always placed more value on aesthetics and beauty than ideas, have become fascinated with the SS and Nazis as symbols of evil, but not as actually evil. So they pay lip service to the idea that the Nazis are horrible, and the SS are just the worst, and fail utterly to understand that the worst thing of all is human fanaticism, is bullying — the urge to destroy, divested of humanity, and invested with a purpose that confuses ends with means. The ends, for every combat veteran who's spent more than a few weeks in *real* combat, is (1) staying alive, and (2) helping keep one's buddies stay alive. The moment at which Wardaddy decides to stay with his tank, and is then absolutely fine with having his crew with him is the moment, for me, that

the movie became both unrealistic and inaccurate, as well as untrue — in part due to Wardaddy's decision to damn his crew, and in part due to the way in which their efforts to stop the Germans were portrayed in valedictory terms, rather than under a mound of opprobrium.

Fury works when it's a movie about a German tank, filled with SS soldiers who are even at the end of the war and if somewhat skeptically in all practical terms, still committed to fighting and dying for their Fuhrer. Defending a crossroads against impossible odds? Check — the SS was famous for doing precisely that, even though it was stupid and pointless. Ambushing an American military unit many times its size, with the full weight of the U.S. military behind it, and the inevitability of artillery and air power once identified? Check — happened on more occasions than are worth recounting here. *Fury* is a movie about an SS tank, led by the German-speaking Brad Pitt, which is fanatically devoted to the proposition that the enemies of Germany must be stopped at all costs.

Otherwise it doesn't make any sense at all. Worse, by allowing one of the Americans (the "good" one) to live, and by killing the others off heroically against impossible odds, *Fury* sends an awful and inherently misguided message about war, which contributes to the same tired old myth that helps lead America into foolish conflicts today. Good people understand when it is appropriate to head off to war, and do not need convincing — this myth of the necessity to throw one's life away for nothing is far beyond absurd — it is, in fact, obscene. I hope not to see more movies about World War II like *Fury* — perhaps it will be the last. It would be unrealistic of me to actually expect that, though.

Against Obvious Racism

Let's be honest about racism. It's here. And it's not going anywhere. But its prevalence is surprising, again, if we're being honest: we've been under the mistaken impression, for some time, now, outside the ghetto, outside poverty-stricken areas and urban centers (I'm using white code for places that black people live) that America is a fundamentally just society. We thought that we had judicial mechanisms sufficient to satisfy all segments of the population — if not *equally*, at least on some kind of sliding scale. We thought racism was on the downswing. Black comedians, rappers, and religious authorities seemed to be ministering to the disproportionate attention young black men attracted from police. Culturally, we'd accepted, on a broad level, that being black meant that you were more likely to go to prison or have trouble with law enforcement. We accepted similar things about the Hispanic population, and rarely thought anything about the Native American communities — they were wisely placed on reservations many years ago, and given responsibility over themselves, which meant that what happened to them was their fault, and not ours. Recently, the proverbial chickens have come home to roost. We've seen behind the curtain. And the truth is this: while the punishment and social opprobrium have discouraged certain obvious forms of racism, racism itself is as thick on American life as pond scum on a still pond.

When I was in Afghanistan, one of the most remarkable lessons was that justice, and governance, were largely arbitrary — matters of aesthetics. One village would be ruled by a pro-government militia (Afghan Police and Army rarely patrolled, much of what we called "government controlled" land in Afghanistan was, in fact, militia controlled). The militia would collect taxes of 10% or 15% from the population, and would take responsibility for adjudicating tribal disputes. In other words, they acted like the Police, and tribal mechanisms

(elders, etc.) acted like our judiciary. Another village, across a road, or some other terrain feature, would be ruled by the Taliban. The Taliban would collect taxes of 10% or 15% from the population, and would take responsibility for adjudicating tribal disputes using Sharia law — a Mullah would interpret crimes and, having established guilt or innocence, would impose punishment based on the Koran.

Whether a village accepted militia or Taliban rule was a combination of self-interest, security, group preference, and other variables that I do not claim to have understood, as an outsider. The important takeaway, for the purposes of this article, and understanding the role justice plays in our own society, is that *literally any* mechanism was preferable to none, and that the role of "justice" was to keep the peace, was to ensure social stability, and an absence of strife or struggle within a given community. Otherwise, war resulted. Without justice, tribes would go to war against one another over disputed resources, in a heartbeat. This was the situation on the border of Pakistan, territory the government didn't even have the strength to dispute in 2007, let alone manage.

Our American justice system has been failing for a while, now, and the only reason it hasn't been more obvious is that it's only been failing certain portions of the population. For those individuals who are angry about this fact — that it took the well-publicized deaths of three consecutive black men under suspicious circumstances, and the refusal of a Grand Jury to acknowledge what our eyes and ears have shown reasonable people to be true — all I can say is that one knows what one knows. I can't take responsibility for the past, but I can acknowledge the present, and agree with the obvious, logical assessment that things are not correct, things are not just. The system is creating unrest where it should be resolving unrest. The American justice system — and American society in general — is, in as fundamental a way as one can

imagine, broken.

The problem is not the police. I take great exception to the wealth of anger and opprobrium heaped upon our policemen and policewomen. The police are here to enforce our social standards, and they do so, quite effectively. Instead, we should be observing our own actions, and looking in the mirror to assess whether or not the problem lies within ourselves, the people of America. When you see a group of young black men, does part of you worry, does it provoke some nameless anxiety that is not felt when you're around a group of young white men? When you're sitting at a bar and a black man walks in, do you react differently from when a white man enters? Do you see a group of Hispanic people at a bus stop or in a parking lot and immediately draw conclusions about them, their motivations, their histories?

Of course you do. And when a young black man who stole a $5 pack of swisher sweets cigarillos from a convenience store is shot by the police, when you breathe a silent sigh of relief: "one less scumbag who might get rape my wife and blast rap music loudly," that's not an indictment of the police, that's the police doing what you hoped they'd do. Ditto the hell-kid with the pistol replica, and the criminal giant who was blackly and horribly selling loose cigarettes for profit, illegally, on a street corner. *Not in my town*, you think. *Motherfucking property value killing monkeys*.

You can lie to me all you want, and you can also lie to yourself, if that's important to maintaining whatever fiction you're perpetuating. But a lie is a lie, and the truth is this: you're fine with the police hassling black people, because you think black people are criminals, and you want the police to hassle criminals. I feel the same way. We're in a safe place here, we can be honest with each other. I'm scared on the train when black and Hispanic people get on board on Bridgeport or Stamford — they rarely have tickets, and always have some cock-and-bull story about misplacing it, or

moving seats, or who knows what. My hypothesis? They're on the train to rob employed (this is white code for "white") people of their money and tickets.

So — but it's too obvious, now, that's the real problem with Ferguson and Eric Garner and "I can't breathe." The jig's up — people know who we are (white people, and specifically white men), and they know what we want, because they see our desires accomplished through our police. We need to make a change, so people stop rioting and burning the franchises that white people own, like CVS and Rite Aid and Family Dollar. We need to give the blacks justice — even if that means occasionally sacrificing a police officer to a kangaroo court. After all, this is really about *our* safety, and our ability to hold onto the grudges and stereotypes we cherish. If we don't feed the occasional officer to the wolves, it'll all be too obvious, and we'll actually have to change how we think about black people, and women, and Mexicans, and Chinese, and homosexuals. Police officers understand why they get paid overtime and hazardous duty — it's not so they should be safe — they're keeping *us* safe. And sometimes that means we have to hang a police officer up high, by the neck, to prevent the rabble from rioting, from getting on the train and stealing and looting and burning.

Peace in the Middle East (by Xmas 2014): Nukes

I have the solution to the full-blown crisis in the Middle East, and as usual, America is the only country that can do it right. Russia has the resources, but let's face it — they're too fundamentally disorganized and sentimentalist to make it

happen the way it needs to. No, only America can solve this human catastrophe. Sweet, rational, reasonable, capitalist America can do it tomorrow, and for good.

Here's the problem: there are two more or less evenly-matched factions, with a host of smaller groups that are forced to affiliate with one faction or the other, or risk destruction. They have the full array of modern means by which to kill each other — arsenals that would put Hitler's Wehrmacht to flight several times over. They are, the two interests opposed in the Middle East and on into Afghanistan, a perfectly-honed killing machine, and they will slaughter until some third party intervenes to arrest the slaughter, only to resume again after the third party leaves. As soon as one side gains an advantage sufficient for victory, someone steps in with just enough authority to prevent a necessarily bloody, one-sided religious and cultural annihilation. The problem has plagued the area since at least recorded history, and probably longer, and all attempts at a peaceful solution have met with failure.

Until now.

The only reason the United States and Soviet Russia didn't end up going back to war almost immediately after WWII — five to ten years, tops — was fear of the nuclear bomb. We almost went to war several times afterwards *anyway*, pulled back from the edge by the certainty that destroying each other would be foolish and useless if the only thing that we accomplished in so doing was our own destruction. So here's the deal — we give every group of at least 10,000 members within every faction five hydrogen bombs. For you laymen out there, a hydrogen or thermonuclear bomb clocks in around 500 kilotons ("Little Boy," the truth-nugget America dropped on Hiroshima for the unthinkable crime of obstinacy, clocked in at 16 kilotons), enough to level a medium-sized city. That includes Nusra, ISIS, Iraq, the Iraqi Kurds, the Syrian Kurds, Assad's regime, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the Taliban — everyone. Everyone gets enough nuclear ass to wipe the other portion off

the face of the earth, plus a little bit left over to use as they please.

Now I know what you're thinking. "We've worked so hard to prevent these groups from getting nukes — what's to stop them from using them irresponsibly, against each other, or against us? They want to destroy our freedom, and freedom is notoriously vulnerable to atomic weaponry." That's a valid concern. But while it's *possible* that our gift to the Middle East of enough fire and anger to destroy itself several times over, with the push of a button, another possibility exists: peace.

I said it. It's possible — even *likely*, I would argue, that, faced with the very real possibility of nuclear annihilation — total destruction, the kind where nobody gets anything, and in such a way that your soul gets trapped here on earth by the blast, do not pass go, do not ascend to heaven — each faction would look to make peace with each other, and with us. Nuclear weapons have a strange way of inspiring even the biggest zealots among us to exercise restraint. Zealotry is usually tied to egotism and a fear of being destroyed — a desire for sex and procreation and the assurance that one will be free to make children who can in turn make children. Arm everyone with nukes, and we'll all be safe.

What's the downside? Well, it'll be a tough sell for some countries. Israel has been justifiably concerned that if Arab countries and Iran get their hands on nukes, that they will use the nukes against them, and wipe them off the map. Surely, however, this is rhetoric — the Arab countries and Iran really just want Israel for themselves. And, once again, 2500 kilotons would destroy Israel utterly — nobody could have it. No, I think Israel would be safer, if anything, were it to be surrounded with suddenly-responsible people. Nukes are like the philosopher's stone of radicalism, causing the most

hardline beheaders to morph into paragons of conservatism and restraint. It should be at the point where there's at least one nuke in every city in the Middle East, pointing at some other city. Sure, it'd be terrifying — but nothing would happen. Guarantee it.

And just to make sure, we could enable a trigger mechanism with a GPS function that would detonate if anyone screwed with it, and detonate if it was moved out of the Middle East. We can build cars that drive themselves. We can make a GPS nuke that won't travel. It's not rocket science.

We'd do it all at once. Make an announcement: "Check it out. Syria, Iraq, Qatar, Yazidi, Kurds, Turkey, Hezbollah, Armenia, Hamas, Kuwait, Taliban, Afghanistan, on December 1st, at 1200, we're going to be flying planes full of nuclear anger into your countries. Resistance is futile. If you shoot at the planes they'll just drop the bombs instead and see how you like that. Take possession of the nukes — they will be attached to simple trigger mechanisms that require only the push of a conveniently big red button — and let our planes fly away, in peace. Good luck and godspeed."

This is a fine and workable idea. I will get some good sleep at night — mighty good sleep — as the fire burning the Middle East is put out for once and for all. Faced with the abyss, rather than platitudes — there's no honor in getting destroyed for nothing, without the chance to even think of Allah or God or whomever — people would settle into the same boring, quotidian routines that we've come to resent.

America and Iran: The Great Post-Persia Hangover

We never meant things to get out of hand the way they did in Iran. Let's agree about that to begin with, let's agree that the CIA's role in [replacing a democratically elected but left-leaning leader](#) in the 1950s with a dictator, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was understandable in the context of Persia's vast oil fields, and the widespread belief at the time that we were on the strategic defensive against an ascendent and nuclear Soviet Union. Let's agree that yes, there were excesses, as there often are, even in our society today. There was CIA-condoned torture — a lot of it — so much so that if you were to ask an Iranian immigrant from that time about the Shah, he or she would likely tell you that life under the Shah was about as bad as it later became under the Clerics — but Persia was right next to the Soviet Union, and this was an existential fight. Sometimes you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet, especially when the free world is on the line.

Iran was supposed to be a lock, for us, like it had been for the British. And the thing about America is that it's better than Britain — in many ways, it's just Britain 2.0. More freedom. Better PR. Hotter chicks, with better teeth. That's the promise of America — bigger, beefier, less nonsense, and we can tell the difference between a bad guy and a good guy. Above all, the implicit bargain between America and its overseas pals is simple: you love us, we've got your back.

The type of revolution that occurred in Persia, coming when it did, after Vietnam, was unthinkable. A safely pro-US country turned its back on us, and started calling us "The Great Satan." Worse than couching its rhetoric in a language we shared, the language of religion, they didn't even ally with the Soviet Union. A defection along rational lines from our system to that of the Soviet Union would have stung, but was

also easy to rationalize — we'd just allowed ourselves to get beat by the Vietnamese, because of weak and liberal politicians. In other words, had Persia gone Red like everyone else, well, that's because we were beating ourselves. We were too weak. That was the national narrative at the time. And when you're losing due to some decision you made, when you're losing due to omission, it's almost like you didn't lose at all, right? It's not like fighting fair, mano e mano, and getting slapped down by someone stronger.

But Persia went for something new, and pre-enlightenment. They went in the opposite direction of the Soviet Union. They rejected Western systems entirely, and embraced a pre-colonial, theology-based organization instead. It's pointless to debate the merits of their system — anyone who'd claim Iran ended up better off as a theocratic despotism is either an extremist, an ideologue, or a buffoon. They slapped our hand away, *and* that of the Soviet Union. They said, essentially, that they hated us so much, they were willing to invent their own model, to hell with our science, to hell with a better life, to hell with all of it. If they were going to torture their own citizens, they were going to do it their own way, by god, and they did. The smack from that hand-slap has resonated, awfully, throughout our foreign policy ever since.

The greatest sin you can make against the United States of America is to hate us. Is to reject our love. Iran compounded that sin doubly — by threatening Israel, which is still a part of their official rhetoric, and by the aforementioned bad timing of their revolution occurring on the heels of our defeat in Vietnam.

It doesn't take a genius to draw parallels with the current situation in Iraq and Syria. In ISIS (or ISIL, or IS, or Daesh) we see a similar impulse: a group of people who have discounted and rejected American assistance, save in a way

that is supremely irritating (taking the plundered ammunition, vehicles, and weapons of our fallen proxies). To a certain constituent group with which we've become acquainted these last two decades, that we never suspected existed before, ISIS and Iran represent a clean break with the West, a positivist assertion of a moment in history when ethnic and religious social groups could exist outside a post-enlightenment, post-rational framework, and the colonialism and exploitation that went along with it. To ISIS and Iran, there's no fundamental difference between America and the Soviet Union.

I'm against intervening militarily in Iraq and Syria, and have written why at length elsewhere. Regardless of whether you think I'm full of s*** or not — many feel that way — one has to acknowledge that America's behavior in the Middle East has been desultory, reactionary, and short-sighted, which is why, in part, we keep encountering groups that profess to hate us. Once we begin to acknowledge that we were partly (although again, understandably) responsible for creating the conditions where a thing like Iran or ISIS could exist in the first place, we will have taken the first necessary step toward avoiding the mistakes that we will, left to our own devices and current foreign policy, create again in ten or twenty years, and then again after that. The lesson of Iran shouldn't be that we must be at loggerheads with an entire people — but that time heals all wounds, and it's okay for a group to not love us without America going ballistic in response.

These Colors Don't Run:

Afghanistan Edition

It's sad when you already know what people are going to say when you tell them that [staying in Afghanistan today](#) is as stupid and pointless now as it was in 2003, or 2009, or 2011. They're going to say "but look what happened in Iraq," relying on their audience's lack of understanding of or interest in the two countries to allow that logic to stand as a reason why we should continue keeping boots on the ground. They're going to say "but what about the Taliban," as though a grassroots organization based in Pakistani territory — never reachable, wholly beyond our ability to control or solve — has anything to do with "Afghanistan's" problems. They're going to say "we can't let Afghanistan fall apart like Iraq," although our first move in Afghanistan was to install a truculent, overtly partisan Pashtun who did everything in his power to prevent regional Tajik and Uzbek warlords from getting wrapped into the official security apparatus.

When a region has a problem, and that problem is a longstanding crisis of confidence in a population's political leadership, owing to that leadership being perceived as a bunch of crooks who've sold out to various Western powers over the last century (Britain, America, France, Russia), the symptom is an outraged local movement focused inwardly, and interested primarily in isolating itself from foreign-minded politicians, as well as foreign countries' influence. In Afghanistan that was the Taliban. In Iraq and Syria, obviously, the "people" have flocked to extremist organizations like al Nusra, ISIS, the Mahdi militias, and similar outfits. In America, it's the libertarian party and the Tea Party — tired of America's continued hyper-involvement in other countries' domestic squabbles (the Western power to which we've sold out, according to party members, is ourselves — American politicians and big business, as represented by Mitt Romney and Hillary Clinton).

Advocates of ongoing military intervention in Afghanistan, and expanded intervention in Iraq, and propping up regimes like Yemen's, and the type of meaningless, low-level provocation in Ukraine that will only encourage Putin to take more in the months and years to come, and selling out protests like the student demonstrations in Hong Kong — advocates of violence as a means of solving external local problems would have you believe that their method will resolve movements like the Taliban, and ISIS. That by killing over years and decades, we can kill enough of the people that oppose us that the opposition will simply vanish, and in its place will be compliant and responsible citizens who are friendly (or at least neutral) to our political system, to the West.

This way of thinking is naïve in the extreme. In no culture ever have people have been whipped or bullied into submission. It's never happened. There have been events where this type of behavior between cultures escalated to the point where one side essentially annihilated the other, or demonstrated its willingness to do so — but I don't think anyone's advocating that America or the West exterminate the populations of nations where significant portions of the population hate us, replacing those populations with American or European settlers. Even if this were practical or possible, the act itself would damn us more completely than our lazy and casual large-scale murder campaigns have over the last decade.

So why are we staying in Afghanistan? Only the most tortured, rhetorically disingenuous flip-flopper could contort our accomplishments in that war-torn land to the point where our continued presence makes any kind of sense for our strategic interests, or those of our European allies. Saying that "The Afghans" want us there is similarly misguided — the product of deeply blinkered reports from Kabul and Mazir-e-Sharif, or the product of those think-tank and consulting groups whose diseased minds were responsible for getting us into that mess in the first place.

And if it feels like what we're doing in staying is "stabilizing" Afghanistan, take a look at SIGAR's website. If stability is demonstrating to the Afghan people and the rest of the world that we can't manage tens of billions of dollars on boondoggles and graft, then, yes, we've achieved a ton of stability in Afghanistan recently.

But if not — if we haven't actually stabilized the country — if what we've done instead is committed ourselves to a longer, more explosive slide into violence than anything we've seen in the Middle East so far — if staying in Afghanistan is just deferring the inevitable, as well as adding to an expense bill we can scarce afford at home — well, then why are we doing it? Is this actually the best idea we have, the status quo? Are we so bankrupt of creativity and intellectual power that we're just kind of riding it out, seeing what happens? This is the worst type of intellectual dishonesty, and Potemkin governance. But it's what we expect from ourselves —no surprise it's what we expect from others. If only the populations of these other countries would cooperate with us, instead of hating us.

The Wrath of Islam

I read [a piece on Vox](#) recently (compliments of former roommate and exceptional human being Damien Spleeters) the point of which was to disabuse readers of "myths" surrounding the Islamic State. The piece had a useful goal: to educate readers about the Islamic State, presumably so the reader could make more reasonable decisions about whether or not to support military engagement, or how to help resolve the problem of the Islamic State. I read the piece, twice, and while I found it better than much of the analysis elsewhere in mainstream

media, it failed to disrupt the broader myth of the Islamic State. I want to continue the dialogue here, by examining what we hope to accomplish, and why.

Fact number one: Americans love violence. We love it in our movies and literature. We buy it en masse. The best television dramas aren't just *full* of violence – they depend on it, without violence (and especially that most acceptable acts of violence – revenge, or retributive, or just violence) much of our entertainment would cease to make any kind of sense. This is true for American-made, American-written stories in a way that it is not for almost every other culture in the world, with the current exceptions of Chinese and Japanese cinema and literature, which are similarly saturated with violence, rape, and murder. Unsurprisingly, Japanese art has a large and enthusiastic following in America – unsurprisingly given our politics, Chinese art does not.

Fact number two: American love for violence extends into the political sphere. This is accomplished by adventurers who are wearied by peace, and bored by long-term projects to increase sustainability in communities, foreign and domestic. It is accomplished by cynical career politicians like Hillary Clinton and Karl Rove, both of whom understand that being seen as a powerful leader is part of what makes a good political candidate. And whereas there used to be a dominant isolationist, business-oriented, violence-sublimated strain to American politics – the old Republican Party, the boring, sober, clear-eyed realists of American politics that largely went extinct in the 70s and 80s, replaced by the current group of wild-eyed missionaries and Kulture-zealots. The Democratic Party still benefits from the perception that its constituency helped end the Vietnam War – they did not, it was the old, extinct Republican Party, Democrats began and expanded our involvement in Vietnam – but utopians on the left have always been the biggest proponents of foreign intervention on a small and large scale. Only recently, again, have utopians on the

right begun to appropriate that narrative for themselves. For personal and professional reasons, as well as owing to the fact that journalism is a profession like any other, and there is no licensing process for thinking or talking or writing, most of the media coverage of every international event will be slanted toward creating the perception that American intervention is absolutely necessary.

Fact Three: American military intervention in other countries' affairs usually makes things worse — occasionally much worse. Sometimes it doesn't make things awful. That's what we're playing for, in the real world. It's like that time on *The Simpsons* when Homer is asked to relate the particulars of some event — in his mind, he's a tall, buff man, talking with the President of the United States, while (for no good reason) he is surrounded by aliens. Marge is exasperated by this obviously impossible account of events, and shuts him down. Advocates for military intervention are *always* prone to being Homer. Marge doesn't exist. Let's glance over big-ticket American military interventions over the last century:

Spanish American War — we freed Cuba and Puerto Rico and the Philippines from Spanish hegemony. That was such a staggering success for us and for our foreign policy that each of those three countries are… *oh, right*. Currently in shambles.

WWI — we beat the Germans, so the English and French could win WWI, because we liked their uniforms better (or something — there is actually no good reason we became involved in WWI and anyone who wants to dispute that is welcome to do so in the comment section), and then Europe was peaceful forever after that. WWI kicker — intervention in Soviet Revolution, against Lenin. Huge win for U.S., made everything better.

China in the 30s and 40s — we helped the Chinese resist the Japanese, which was cool, by supporting a monomaniacal tyrant who was happy to exterminate large swaths of the Chinese population, which was confusing because Chiang Kai-sheck

could've looked like Tojo with glasses. What, they all look the same! Anyway, our support for the Chinese made everything better in China forever.

In **World War II**, we armed and equipped the Soviets and British to fight against Germany, then fought on the Allied side when Japan declared war on us. Defeating the Japanese actually did make things better over there — the Japanese may be the one place and time where our intervention actually helped. Our interest in doing so was tied to fear of the Soviets, who, despite our help during WWII, didn't like us very much, as anyone with half a brain could've predicted going in. Germany's life did not get better as a result of our intervention in WWII, they lost more of their territory, which made France and England happier, were split into two, and occupied. Sadly, everyone with some exposure to Soviet documents now understands that the Soviet Union was expecting us to attack them, and were never in any position to take over Europe, making the Cold War at least 50% our fault. Crazy when you think about it that way, but there you go.

Korea was a push — we made South Korea, run by a brutal dictator into the mid-eighties, look a lot like Japan. Life in North Korea after our military intervention did not improve — it actually got worse, to the point where it is actually a cliche that describes how awful life could be.

Iran — If you want a really sad, depressing accounting of how overseas, please read [the *official* account](#) of the Iran coup of 1953. Makes you feel bad for Iran, and bad about us. Eisenhower's weak link as a president was British, and despite history assigning the responsibility for this one to us, it really was a British screw-up.

Vietnam — the less said, the better. We intervened militarily and things got so much better, it hurts even to think about it. Excruciating irony kicker — after arming or allying with South Vietnamese to fight their North Vietnamese cousins in

order to protect them against Chinese and Soviet communism, the newly-reunified Vietnam fought a bitter, vicious war with China just a year after we closed our embassy. How's that for gratitude — they could've at least pretended to be friends so as not to hurt our feelings. I mean, that's one insanely useless war!

Cambodia & Laos — I don't know much about these places, but am told that what happened after we intervened militarily helped their tourist industry. You're welcome, Cambodia and Laos. Can't wait to visit.

Africa — strongest continent on earth!

Iraq I — made things better for Kuwait, by keeping that territory out of Saddam Hussein's hands. Were it not for our actions, the one quarter to one half of Kuwait's population that's actually Kuwaiti, and not some kind of slave, would have had to call themselves Iraqi instead. And as everyone knows, being an Iraqi sucks.

Somalia — We did not improve Somalia.

Afghanistan — Has life gotten better since the Taliban left? Well — it hasn't gotten much worse. That's gotta be worth something.

Iraq II — Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator who terrorized the Middle East until we deposed him. He massacred 30,000 Kurds, which is awful. Unfortunately, things didn't get better in Iraq while we were there, until we hired 20% of their population as security guards. Sort of disingenuously, Republicans and neo-conservatives have made it sound like it was having U.S. soldiers on the ground that was keeping Iraq safe. All I'm saying is, we had a lot of soldiers on the ground there while not paying off 20% of the population and we got attacked all the time. Had a lot of soldiers there while paying off 20% of the population and things got real quiet. In any case, shit's out of control there right now.

Libya — Don't bring up Libya. It's fucking horrible there right now. A nightmare in every sense of the word.

Iraq III and Syria — shipping arms to militant groups we like at the moment has a way of burning us. It's always the same story, too — they're heroes when they need weapons, and then they're awful, raping, human-rights-violating criminals afterward. Putting boots on the ground will not lead to a long-term deterioration in security, it will do so at the expense of American lives. Airstrikes are worse than useless, although they seem to make us feel better about ourselves. The Islamic State is a group that is using Western-style propaganda videos, and speaking to us, and encouraging us to become involved in Iraq and the Middle East right when it looks like we've extricated ourselves. Why? Because they know that our involvement in the Middle East will make things better for their cause! *Why can't we see this? Why do so many believe, against all visible proof to the contrary, that involvement in Iraq or Syria will improve anything in those countries?* The counterargument — well, we can't leave them to the Islamic State, that'd be horrible, distorts reality. However horrible it will be for Iraqis, Kurds, and Syrians to face the Islamic State alone, it will *only be worse* if we intervene by arming proxies, or by deploying soldiers and carrying out air strikes. I know this, and can say so definitively, because I have two eyes, and a brain, and am literate, and was paying attention to what happened over the last fifteen years.

Meanwhile — just so we know how the Middle East perceives us — the place we want to stabilize through the creation of a client-state in Kurdistan, or through Iraq, or — I'm not sure what our plan is because all the options are so bad — in any case, our reputation is so shitty in the region that as *The Huffington Post* reported recently, Middle Easterners believe that the [CIA is funding the Islamic State](). We are a myth to the very people we insist on helping — a nightmare — why are

we so insistent on participating in yet another bloodletting? When they're both expensive, and do no long-term good?

Fury: A Realistic but Stupid, Useless Film

Hollywood does not know how to make a film about war. This has been proven on so many different occasions, often averred on this blog, across the spectrum of time and experience, that I almost wonder why I'm bothering to write another essay on the subject. There are other projects I could be working on — short fiction, advocacy for responsible foreign policy, poetry, running. Developing personal relationships. Finding a useful pursuit beyond criticizing gross failures of imagination, when — to be perfectly frank — nobody's listening, anyway.

When I watched the preview of *Fury* I immediately tweeted about it — words to the effect of "Saving Private Ryan with Tanks." I have not watched the movie, as Michael Cieply did before reviewing it for *The New York Times*, but I've read his review, and combined with the two-plus minutes of preview I endured (several times), I feel confident delivering my reaction to the movie in full. Here's me lifting my glass to the previewers, and Cieply, who seemed to feel pleased that the film was made, because I will not waste my money on it, it's certain to be trash. Worse than that, the type of trash that deceives its watchers into thinking they've done something useful, or honored their grandparents, or I don't know what.

Here are some excerpts from the beginning of his review: "Raw." "The Good War this is not." "Hero." "Relentlessly authentic." "Poised to deliver what popular culture has rarely seen." "Executed prisoners and killed children." Later on in the review, after exposition on the significance of a movie dedicated to the tankers, and the crews of Sherman tanks, "Much of what [Pitt's] Wardaddy does may shocked viewers who have watched American soldiers behave brutally in Vietnam War films at least since 'Apocalypse Now,' but have rarely seen ugliness in the heroes of World War II." "In his harsh initiation of a new gunner, Mr. Pitt's Character crosses lines, both legal and moral. Not even Lee Marvin's Sergeant Possum in Samuel Fuller's 'The Big Red One,' another knife killer, went quite so far."

"This time around, the subject will be those damaged tanker-heroes."

Give me a break.

Without watching the movie, based on the preview, and *The New York Times* review, I'm going to head out on a limb and claim that if specific catalogue of carnage using *different weapons than we're used to* reveals some epiphany about the horror of war, I'll eat a leather shoe.

I'll do it. So help me god, I'll boil one of my leather shoes, and eat it.

According to the review, there's a scene in the movie where someone from Wardaddy's crew has to kill a "buddy." A tank gunner vet quoted in the review claims that he didn't see that type of behavior himself while serving 28 months overseas during WWII — one imagines that such events happened, even if they were exceptional. So what? There's a great deal about how

this movie isn't *Inglorious Basterds,* although there's another knife scene in it — presumably realistic, to show the grit of war, because according to the review (and the movie's actors and makers), war is a series of physical actions more or less without negative consequence, unless you're the person getting killed or stabbed.

A great deal of time is spent in the review on the writer/director, David Ayer, and his bona fides, as though that has anything to do with whether the movie is good, or accurate, or useful. Apparently Ayer has a man-cave in Los Angeles packed with war memorabilia. Apparently he himself served in the Navy during the 1980s, on a submarine crew. Apparently he reads lots of historical fiction and non-fiction accounts of World War II. Apparently any of that, combined with Brad Pitt, means he knows how to write and direct a "good" war movie worth watching.

It sounds like his movie sucks balls.

Here's how *Fury* could maybe not be a movie that totally blows, and should never have been made (I'd be happy to eat that shoe if I'm proven wrong, because it will have been worth it to be wrong):

- The violence does not lead anywhere, and is seen visibly eroding good people and changing them in ways they do not like, and does them no good
- Combat is seen as a sequence of misfortunes, ideally misfortunes that befall the actor rather than the subject. Guns jam in comical ways. Soldiers shit themselves. People shake and weep. I'm guessing that Brad Pitt isn't the sort of character (at least not if he's being described as a hero) that he played in *12 Monkeys* — batshit crazy, crying in the mayhem, barely able to function. No — I'm guessing he's the guy who sticks knives into Nazi skulls, which everyone knows is cool.

- At least one of the soldiers should do something despicable — not like killing their buddy because they have to, to save him/her (unless it's a major plot point), but because they enjoy it. I'd recommend the rape of someone vulnerable, say, a French or Jewish refugee. This should point to that character's basic cowardice as a human being, a point underlined by their altruistic (not necessarily poor) performance in combat. It should go without saying that this soldier would be American.

At some point — maybe *Saving Private Ryan* — people decided that realistic portrayals of combat were socially useful because they were honest and brutal, and *I assume* that was supposed to dissuade people from wanting to experience war. If this is an idea that's floating around in Hollywood, please allow me to argue vigorously against it. Many people I knew in the military (the two other primary contributors to this blog, Mr. Carson and Mr. James being definite exceptions) loved those movies, called them "badass," and watched them over and over again. The weak secondary characters were disliked, and the enemies were hated. No deeper meaning was extracted from the films. Again — if Hollywood feels that making a realistic movie about tanks, or submarines, or bombers, or fighter planes, or black units, or white units, or Navajo units, or *anything* fighting Nazis and the SS and the commies is going to make young people feel revulsion toward war, or horror at its deprivations — they're delusional. *Fury* will merely be added to a long list of factually probable representations of violence that help beat the drums for another generation of people to glamorize the worst parts of state-sanctioned murder, and prepare them to serve in misbegotten causes.

Which brings me to my final thought, and I've had this thought for a while: if the big Hollywood producers were interested in making a good war film about World War II, they could do a lot

worse than reading *2666*, meditating for a while, and then creating a film that takes Peckinpah's superlative *Cross of Iron* and elevates it to the next level. Yes: I'm proposing that the best way to create a useful and accurate anti-war film would be to make the protagonists Germans — preferably German light infantry, the type that got chewed up on the Eastern Front with casualty rates somewhere above 1,000%, then was redeployed to the Western Front to fight the Americans and promptly bombed out of existence, for no good reason at all. The greatest mine for really good, true war stories, in my opinion, is the *Wehrmacht* — my guess is that nobody in Hollywood has the guts to put that movie together. After all, America's about winning, and the Nazis were evil, and every German was a Nazi. And so we'll continue singing ourselves to sleep at night with patriotic tunes on our lips, secure in our confidence that Brad Pitt and his buddies did what they had to because in the end, it was just a bad dream.

Suicide and the Military

There are two substantial issues facing the American military and veteran community today. The first, a logical and narratively unified reaction to years of hero-worship, is a backlash against the impulse to thank soldiers for their service — a tendency, made explicit in recent media pieces, to vilify veterans and stigmatize them as prone to violence, hatred, racism, bigotry, and murder. The second issue is less dangerous than the first in absolute terms, but based on real statistics and empirical evidence: a growing problem with suicide.

This topic has been examined under a microscope. 22 soldiers and veterans die per day in America by their own hand, victims

of some unknowable, tragically preventable plague. Especially tragic given the notion that a person who has cheated death should have some sort of inherent attachment to life. We believe that a man, having avoided bombs, bullets, and grenades from determined foes as variable as the enemies we've faced over the last seventy years, should have a higher reason to live. We believe that a soldier-veteran, ennobled by the experience of having come close to an end to their existence, should far more than others be eager to embrace the world, to love life. We imagine that we, in our dull day to day lives, which include regret, and trifle, and petty annoyances, have got it bad, and that veterans have seen clear through to some transcendent truth. Like a sunset over the water after a thunderstorm, with rays of light reaching up into the heaven, and beyond ourselves. Like encountering a known limitation, and moving beyond it.

Of course veterans are people like everyone else. Different in the sense that they've made a choice many non-veterans think — wrongly — that they're incapable of making, fed on a steady diet of propaganda from movies, books, comics, video games, and history. Think, then, how disappointing it must be for a servicemember — a soldier, marine, airman, sailor, or coastguardsman (what do they call themselves?) — to discover that they won't see war? Or, having seen it, that there's no transcendent truth behind a dead face — friend or foe? Imagine that every meaningful assumption you'd made about the order of things was up-ended — good, generous, industrious and clever people died or were thwarted, while bad people, lazy and unscrupulous people profited and prospered? How would you feel, to know that life and death meant nothing?

I'm laying aside the question of faith in a higher power, and refraining from offering my own thoughts on the subject because a great many different ideas have occurred simultaneously in war on the topic of who believed what about

which God, and praying to each of them seems to have had about the same effect (which is to say, nothing). Also, men of faith have taken their own lives, and agnostics and atheists have done the same, and out of respect for their service to God and Country, I should like to imagine that their lives are better or easier now.

During my time in the military, I came to believe that one reason there were so many suicides — apart from the proportional wealth of toxic leaders I encountered who likely did much to encourage their soldiers to take their own lives — was that it's the single area over which the military has absolutely no jurisdiction. Each individual is instructed from the earliest moments in training that authority is violence, and violence is authority, and who can do the greatest harm to whom determines rank. A salute isn't just a gesture of respect, it's an acknowledgement of hierarchy. One person must awake at four in the morning to clean an area so that another person can walk over it with dirty boots. Infractions are punished. Individuality is punished. Thoughts are punished. Feelings are punished.

But suicide can't be punished. Threats of suicide and suicide attempts are taken seriously by military units — very seriously — with the offending soldier often being carted out to behavior health and instantly transformed into a walking pariah, at least to the extent to which that soldier is still allowed to be a part of their unit. The impulse or desire to commit suicide, vocalized, is the worst type of offense possible — likely because it undermines the possibility of corrective violence, which is the military's only organizational / institutional ability to correct misbehavior. For a toxic leader, who relies only on the threat of violence, suicide must be an evil. For a good or scrupulous leader, suicide is an unparalleled catastrophe.

Some people are afflicted with medical conditions that prevent them from taking any joy in life, or the world. Depression —

suicidal depression — is a real condition. For these people, sights and smells and sentiments from which reasonable people would take pleasure offer nothing instead. These people require help — medical assistance, psychiatric guidance — and should be in places, surrounded by professionals who are capable of giving them said help. I've had brushes with depression in my own life, had my share of beautiful summer evenings that unaccountably tasted like ash — enough to know that people who must live with depression, with existential crisis, on a daily, hourly basis are truly cursed.

But this is different. These active duty military service members are killing themselves not because of a biochemical predisposition toward self-murder, but as an alternative to a torture that must feel infinitely worse than the idea of painlessness.

Veteran suicide, meanwhile, points at a similar but more diffuse problem — the problem of finding suitable engagement for veterans habituated to being employed, accustomed to using themselves in a way that creates meaning and value for their societies (but unable to do that in the context of the military any more, for a variety of reasons). Society itself becomes the problem for which the only solution is painless release — a society where service members are allowed to transition out without having jobs ready for them, or livelihoods assured.

So long as the military has toxic leadership, and a promotion system that encourages toxicity, many service members will take their own lives. So long as society does not have adequate room for veterans who wish nothing more than a steady pay check and some sort of useful employment, veterans will take their own lives. Perhaps the answer to the scourge is not to vilify the preventable suicides — but vilify the systems that make them possible in the first place. Otherwise, the prudent solution could be to stop vilifying suicide in the first place — make it an acceptable option in the event that a

person's life is truly unbearable. Of course, the system of financial servitude we live in could not bear such a situation — it would quickly collapse.

Reaction to Helen Benedict's "The Moral Confusion of Post-War America"

Thought experiment. Someone you know, and who knows you, but not very well, says in public that you have no integrity. Like this: "You have no integrity. Zero. None. That's what I think. This is my serious face." How would you respond? Take a second with that thought.

According to a piece in Guernica, during a talk between Hassan Blasim, author of *The Corpse Exhibition* (an exceptional piece of writing, according to many whose opinions I trust) and a veteran moderator, one such moment occurred recently. Blasim asked the veteran: "All the time, I hear American soldiers say they are proud. But how can you carry a weapon and invade another country and call yourself proud?"

Helen Benedict, [the piece's](#) author, and the one who relays that quote, is an author herself, and a professor of writing at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. She makes many statements in her essay, titled *The Moral Confusion of Post-War America* that develop from Blasim's question. She seems to feel that the choice to serve in war is an inherently bad one, and doesn't understand how one could see or do or choose to see and do those things and still feel good about the experience, to honestly claim that one is proud. Of country, of self.

Helen is a friend. I don't know Blasim, or his work, but I've read enough about it to have a healthy respect for his imagination and his talent. I'm going to attempt to answer the question, now, of why I believe what I did was — not just necessary, but *good* — despite the horrors — perhaps because of them. I should preface it by saying I have the utmost respect for Helen and her point of view, which is a view shared by my father and most of his friends, so far as I can tell — this is not surprising, given that they grew up during the Vietnam era, when the moral choices available to citizens and draftees were very different from the choices available to us today.

Assuming that Blasim really wanted an answer to his question, and wasn't merely trolling the vet with a paradox designed to introduce intellectual discomfort, which is also fine. Blasim's native Iraq (he lives in Finland) was invaded and plundered and destroyed by war. He's entitled to his ideas about things — I'm not challenging his logic, or his position. He is correct.

I am an American soldier, and I carried and shot a rifle, and fired artillery and dropped bombs, and ordered people forward again and again, mostly to attack, and people died by my hand and by the hands of others who obeyed my orders. And I am proud of my service.

I didn't get to go to Iraq. The first time, my unit was supposed to go and then, a month before the departure date the surge pushed us off the chart to Iraq and we were rerouted to Afghanistan. Everyone had been learning Arabic. The second time, my unit was supposed to go and then, three months before the departure date, the surge pulled us onto the chart to Afghanistan, so I didn't see Iraq. But I joined to lead soldiers in Iraq, so that should count for something.

I also protested Iraq. I was on 1st Avenue with Aidan McGlaze, blocks from the UN, near 50th street. We watched Desmund Tutu. There were over 100,000 of us. I vocally and actively

participated in this demonstration, and other smaller events, and felt fully committed to the notion that we should not invade. When we did, anyway, it was a bitter blow, and disillusioning in the way one probably imagines such things are for young men.

Blasim might ask why I didn't do more, or less, and the answer is that it wouldn't have mattered. America invaded Iraq despite my wishes, against my better judgement. This is the point at which he and I, and Helen and I part paths. Because once it became clear that the war was not going anywhere, that it was happening, an indisputable fact of our lives — that it would not end any time soon — I went to the Army recruiting station. Late November of 2004. Bush had four more years. Abu Ghraib was blowing up (though the original incident had occurred in May). We were still in Afghanistan.

In a country with a professional Army, the choice is not whether or not to avoid service. Everyone avoids service, by not being presented with a choice to avoid it or not. You get to not serve unless you really want to or need to. That's fine, and acceptable, and in many ways all to the good. Save that in a country of rampant economic inequality, many more people need to than want to, and, ultimately, service becomes an economic obligation for some, while others can do as they like.

I felt that under such circumstances, I needed to serve, and this idea caught ahold of me like a conviction. I knew that war was wrong. I knew that killing and carrying a rifle would produce moral injury. I also understood that the people in my society, like me save for a trick of biographical history, who'd been compelled to serve for a variety of reasons, would return with moral injury, and I'd never be compelled to endure

any privation.

My friends will tell you that I talk a lot about loving America, mostly in ironic terms. In truth, I feel a great affection to the country that my ancestors helped found, for which generations of ancestors have fought and toiled and bled, the country that allowed me to have a peaceful, moral upbringing, and the best education in the world, at a fantastic prep school (Hopkins) and a fantastic college (Yale). I feel, strongly, that the red, white and blue — the best of it — flows in my veins. I don't begrudge that feeling to anyone — it's an inclusive feeling. The best part about America, my favorite part, is that the *promise* is that anyone can share in that dream. My ancestors were peasants and nobility and drifters and criminals and schemers and farmers and lawyers. Like everyone. Come to America, take part in the dream, you're welcome to be my brother and my sister.

I like that idea, although I know that in practice it rarely works out that way, and less and less as time goes on. So — why am I proud of my service? Because in every era, there is a war. Each generation faces its struggle — to participate or not. I chose to participate in the proper way this generation, which is correct for this generation in a way that it wasn't for the Vietnam era, or for WWII, or for the Civil War.

I sympathize with Blasim, whose country has been ravaged by war and dictatorship and injustice, systematically — whose native country has been exploited by successive empires for centuries — whose birthplace, Iraq, was doomed by the British and French decades before he or I first drew breath. He talks about war, I'm told, as a series of ghosts that haunt the living, and each other. Well — I don't feel particularly haunted by my ghosts — they are my guardians, the certainty that I will attempt to act a little bit better than they did, that I will avoid making the same mistakes they did.

And in Afghanistan, we did avoid those mistakes. We did make

progress. We did good. I did that, carrying a rifle, because I represented the strong, and I was willing to stand up to the bullies in the areas where bullies called themselves Taliban, and they were defeated. They would not have been defeated without weapons. I suppose someone could talk about how the Taliban was given weapons by the CIA in the 80s, or through funding to Pakistan's government, but that's a ghost speaking. In the 1980s I was watching schools of minnows in a tidepool, or reading, or riding my bicycle. I don't know what the 1980s are.

I'm sorry things have worked out the way they did in Afghanistan, and Iraq, and many places in the world. I understand now that the role of the writer is to help present people with truth, and I think Blasim has probably done that. Helen certainly has. In my opinion, the world is complicated, and one must sometimes hold opposing ideas in one's head simultaneously. Like carrying a gun, and murder, and pride, and kindness. That's not jingoism — that's life, and participating in life.

Helen is correct in her view that war is awful, and should be avoided at all costs. I believe that and agree with her. I can't disagree with any of her points, and I will stand side-by-side with her shouting against war until the day it breaks out. Once it has broken out — once Wotan's spear has been shattered, and all the old alliances and civil obligations we owe each other as humans are gone, and the great calamity has returned for any reason, I believe that one must choose to participate if one can — if one is physically or emotionally able, if one is free from familial responsibilities (as I was) — to help bear some of that moral injury, to bring it home, and to digest it and move on with one's life.

Blasim and Helen disagree with me on this point. I hope that Blasim wouldn't hold it against me, and that Helen doesn't, because I have great respect for them both as thinkers and writers — Helen through experience and Blasim by reputation.

I've made choices in life, and am proud of them.

Yes.

Wil S. Hylton's "Vanished": a Review

Vanished, Wil S. Hylton's book about the search to identify and return servicemembers' remains to their families — no matter the obstacle — is a compelling read. It's a non-fiction account, something between a mystery and a history, and is very well written. It took me three days to finish, and I was going hard, as hard as one can given a Masters Thesis and several other writing obligations. Hylton gives readers a rare view into the obsessive world of the Joint POW/MIA Accountability Command, or JPAC, the military department responsible for tracking down all U.S. service members lost to the tides of war. Not surprisingly given the personalities and circumstances involved, the process costs everyone — the taxpayers (the search costs over a million dollars), the people involved (broken marriages and friendships), and the local communities that are forced to endure years (in some cases, decades) of disruption by Americans bent on finding the answer to ancient questions. Nevertheless, Hylton makes a compelling case for the project by introducing a critical character early in the story, B24 tail gunner Jimmie Doyle's son, Tommy. Tommy's life was disrupted and irrevocably changed by the disappearance of his father, a tail gunner in a bomber who is either shot down over a small island in the Pacific in 1944, or who may have managed to parachute out to safety. The fate of Tommy's father is unclear in part due to the unexplained rumor-mongering of his uncles.

This is a minor flaw in *Vanished*, and it is forgivable — the scope of the book is so great, so broad, that it's impossible for Hylton to avoid raising questions that he cannot answer. The search to find a body that's been lost for seventy years inevitably raises many mysteries and attractive sidebars, and 239 pages isn't enough room or time to adequately address them all. The main storyline is sufficiently interesting to justify the proliferation of idiosyncratic subplots, and Hylton writes skillfully, incorporating them into the overarching theme — a single catastrophe, a human tragedy, echoes through history. The death of a young man does not occur in a vacuum.

One thematic difficulty that from *my* perspective *Vanished* doesn't do quite as well with is the overall issue of World War II nostalgia, which runs through the book like a virus. It's not Hylton's fault — or, if it is, it's as much Hylton's fault as it is Steven Spielberg's, or Tom Hanks', or everyone who's ever participated in the creation of a certain type of vision we hold of the Greatest Generation and what happened in World War II. Maybe it was inevitable, given the father-son storyline Hylton sets up in the beginning — a story that is better in the book than out of it. This isn't to say Hylton sugarcoats war — he doesn't. On the contrary he seems to go to great pains to humanize war, to explain how a thing like war can cost, what dread feels like. At the same time, World War II seems to occupy a special place in peoples' memory. MacArthur, Nimitz, Roosevelt — the Japanese — so much of the backdrop to the actual story is done with the broad brushstrokes of someone whose grandfather fought in World War II. I'm not saying I would've (or could've) written it differently — on the contrary, I'd probably end up falling afoul of similar transgressions — an understandable impulse to romanticize, to sentimentalize. After all, my mother's father was the Bombardier in a B-24 Liberator, over Europe. Regardless of the likely motivations and biases leading to Hylton's characterization of World War II as exceptional and lovely, it's impossible to *condemn* a person for something that

affects so many — nevertheless, I didn't want to pass the topic by, without remark.

Jonathan Swift said that "Satire is a mirror in which a man sees everyone reflected but himself." If that's the case, then *Vanished* operates on two levels. The first, obvious level is as a mystery, a catalogue of challenges overcome by technology, doggedness, skill, and luck. The second, deeper level is as a satire — a mirror of ourselves, and how we choose to remember events. How we tell stories to make the past neat, and how some people cannot bear uncleanliness or untidiness. How America must see World War II — perhaps any war — and, therefore, itself, as beautiful, and comprehensible. Ultimately, this is the epilogue we all decide, collectively, to embrace: Dolce et Decorum est — the memory of an event, told in such a way that in its recounting one can hear the tinkling of its future echo.

When all's said and done, the U.S. government finally delivers an answer to the question of "what happened to Tommy," and the answer seems to have had a human impact that was worth the effort. Hylton's investment — of time, of emotional energy, of his considerable talent — is well worth honoring by reading *Vanished*. It's a complicated book, but very well written, and anyone should find it to be well worth their money. I'd lend you mine, but have already passed it along to my roommate, who's reading it now.

Passive Aggressive: Understanding the Tenor of New War Literature

The suicide bomber came from the wrong direction. He drove a maroon Toyota Corolla into the middle of a group of Afghan police and militia — just an hour into a massive operation to help defeat the Taliban — and brought everything to a screaming stop. His car was packed with screws, nuts, nails, pots, ball bearings, and explosives, and when the shrapnel and overpressure shot into the crowd, it wounded five of my soldiers. It also killed fifteen Afghans (seven civilians, six police, two militia), and seriously damaged two vehicles.

My boss called me. I was told that if the police pulled out from our location, the mission was a scratch: we couldn't go forward alone. The policemen wailed, wept, and collected the pieces of their dead countrymen. I watched as they loaded the dead into pickup trucks and left, all but four of them — leaving us with a token force for our mission. I thought, *If we stop now, their lives, this all will have been for nothing — worse than nothing. We need more than ever to impose our will on these bastards*. I told my boss that the Afghans were still with us, totally committed to the operation. I lied, bald-faced — without Afghan support, we should've stopped, called it all off. I insisted that we continue forward. I made that choice. More people got hurt, later. I made that choice, too.

If my experience were rendered in the style of most existing war literature, this engagement should've felt completely useless, a total waste. Writers with combat experience from World War II or Vietnam would likely characterize such an event as fruitless, hollow, or even criminal. Instead, when I was there on the ground, it felt like the most important thing

in the world — and neither time nor perspective have changed my mind.

How do civilians take in the stories of war? War itself has evolved: information-sharing technology has helped turn Napoleonic squares of uniformed citizens into essentially fluid conflicts between professional soldiers and hidden insurgents. Civilians get glimpses of it through isolated YouTube videos of drone strikes or firefights, or Hollywood films of SEAL teams and Rangers riding helicopters into raid compounds. But the actual, real-time war experienced by soldiers on the ground doesn't have such a neat beginning and end: war is the omnipresent threat of chaos from any direction. Contemporary war — at least the one I saw — is a place in which nobody is safe, anywhere, ever.

But contemporary war literature has not kept up with contemporary war. We need to a develop a literature, one that escapes the limits of both glorified war narratives and cynical condemnations for how war crushes the individual soldier. Neither extreme on this good vs. bad trajectory is true to war today. We must create something new.

To be fair, things used to be different. They really did. Before the industrial revolution, war was smaller, more personal, and comprehensible. Even while nations were fielding armies of greater sizes — tens to hundreds of thousands of people — the means of procurement were villages, hamlets, and towns. During the American Revolution, for example, towns sent small groups of men armed with rifles to ambush British formations, and later to fight in European-style units. Even given the large numbers, however, most soldiers were fighting alongside people they'd grown up with. Communities grieved their losses together, and war was a social as well as personal calamity — the consequences of war were inescapable.

The industrial revolution made every aspect of human society narrower, more specialized, and distant. The Civil War was a

transition point, and it catalyzed the growth of increasingly realistic literature, a marked departure from ideal, Romantic representations of war. Ambrose Bierce's story "[An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge](#)" is an example of this progression. In the spotlight is Peyton Farquhar, who is about to be hung from the Owl Creek Bridge because of his Confederate sympathies; his treasonous support of the Southern army is real, but the act he is being executed for was a set-up by a Union scout. Bierce's characters feel like real people, equally trapped by their institutional or cultural prejudices and the choices they've made.

World War I prompted the dawn of the modern literary modernist movement, which obliterated traditional forms of tradition and narrative. Nearly every memoir or fictional account from the modernists emphasized horror, disassociation, and individual impotence in the face of war on an industrial scale. As poet and soldier Wilfred Owen wrote about a collection of his poems: "This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War." Owen was later killed in battle, a week before World War I ended. Ernest Hemingway, meanwhile, drew from his experience as a wartime ambulance driver when writing *A Farewell to Arms*, a novel emphasizes the ambivalence of soldiers and the depersonalized destruction of war through his short staccato sentences and bleakly simple story. There is no room for flourish here.

Not long later, World War II veterans like Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller wrote literature that confirmed and elaborated on those negative themes, describing mechanized warfare as fundamentally dehumanizing, while emphasizing the absurdity of heroism. In *[Catch-22](#)*, rational choice is circular, leading directly to combat, and death. Orr and Yossarian, two of the main characters in *Catch-22*, are Army officers who attempt everything they can to get out of flying additional bombing

missions in WWII. The war is almost over, and the missions seem guaranteed only lead to more chances to be shot down by the Germans or Italians. Awards and positive recognition mean nothing to either of them. From the novel:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.

Revelations about passivity and absurdity in modern war literature paralleled a recognition that similar situations exist in corporate structures; it has been fashionable to describe life within an institution using the language of sarcasm and irony ever since, from Ken Kesey's [*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*](#) to David Foster Wallace's [*Infinite Jest.*](#)

But for all that, I didn't see much passivity in Afghanistan.

Very quietly, technological advances (internet connectivity and smart phone technology) in and outside battle have returned soldiering and warfare to their personal, pre-industrial state. Each decision of every soldier can have strategic consequences for good or for ill. Instead of individuals overwhelmed by their inability to make meaningful choices, I saw an incredible, almost debilitating amount of agency and responsibility on an hourly basis, always. We risked getting torn apart by dull or sharp metal every time we left our bases, chucked high by overpressure. We risked the same when we were on our bases – as revealed by the Air Force officer killed by a rocket while jogging inside the perimeter

of our base (known as FOB Kunduz).

After a suicide bomber destroyed so much in the middle of our mission, I'd decided to go forward, and we did. The bombing emboldened the Taliban, so as we walked forward under the blistering summer heat, we were moving toward a savage battle across a half-mile front. Armored vehicles, led by engineers, rumbled forward single file down the broad dirt road. The lead vehicle struck an IED, totaling it. The Taliban mortared one of my platoons and attempted to flank our position from the east, then west, blanketing us with bullets. Brass casings from my machine gunner rained down onto my helmet, a soft, hollow rain of clinking as I fed reports higher, and coordinated the defense. Two "Apache" helicopters arrived. The Taliban shot another two U.S. soldiers, and more Afghan police and militia. We pried two compounds away from the Taliban, but it was night-time before, finally, they stopped fighting.

My boss wanted to know if it was worth staying there, after all. What did we hope to accomplish when most of our Afghan allies were mourning?

We needed to stay, I told him. We'd held our own, and could move over to the attack in the morning. I requested more assets, and more time. I doubled down, hoping, but not knowing, that if we could trade punches long enough with the Taliban, we'd kill or exhaust enough of them to make them quit.

But we could fail. This notion terrified and appalled me. It also reveals that my choice was a real one: it had consequences. Acting — taking ownership for a decision, not backing away from the moment — risks humiliation and high-stakes defeat. Pointing our guns and firing, running forward into the woodline, fighting our way into buildings: we could just as easily have accomplished nothing, or worse.

My experiences and those of, say, Tim O'Brien — who wrote *The*

Things They Carried, one of the most important accounts of the Vietnam War — were different. For a long time after returning home, I did not know exactly what those differences were. I couldn't enumerate them. But when I sat down to try my own hand at contemporary literature — *Afghan Post*, a memoir — they began to crystallize before me.

By writing and reflecting on my experiences I discovered that the challenge in processing my experiences in Afghanistan was not due to a feeling of vulnerability or impotence, but to a stifling sense of horror that a thing I said or did might have terrible consequences. Rather than confirming the lessons I'd gleaned from Vonnegut or Heller or O'Brien — that I'd been trapped in a situation completely beyond my control, the proverbial "Catch-22" — my time in Afghanistan convinced me of the opposite. I was never forced or compelled to move forward into battle, and I never demanded that my soldiers move forward, either. The words "I order you" or "I command you" never crossed my lips, literally or implicitly. There were choices to act, every step of the way.

This is not to suggest that Heller and O'Brien and Vonnegut are now irrelevant. Not as humanists, or satirists, or historians. But they are cataloguing a thing, a state of affairs that has no meaning for soldiers or officers like me, veterans who saw what I did. We are soldiers who chose to take a picture of dead Taliban, or not. Soldiers who chose to give their food or water out to impoverished villagers—in violation of orders, but gaining unexpected goodwill. Other soldiers may have made different choices. Still others may have been posted in cities or forts away from the borders or restive Pashtun areas — places that saw little fighting, where all they could do was observe action on a television screen.

For everyone back home, to whom this war must have been a received event on YouTube or at the movies, passivity really is the way to describe their experience of the war. Michael Lokesson, another veteran of current wars, described the

prevailing argument best in an [article](#) he wrote recently in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*:

As war became more mechanized and regimented, and fought on a far larger scale, incorporating new technological implements of death — rifles and cannons, planes and armor, drones and improvised explosive devices — the agency of the individual soldier, however lofty in rank, has diminished.

I wasn't with Lokesson in Iraq, and cannot claim to know his experience or that of his comrades. But while his logic may hold true up to Vietnam and in Iraq, it didn't hold true for Afghanistan, at the very least. Quite the opposite — the agency of the individual soldier has increased.

If there was a bottom to the "agency" parabola, it was likely during WWII, where entire armies and fleets were destroyed without any effect on the outcome of the war. The Japanese sank most of our fleet in the Pacific, and destroyed some hundreds of thousands of British, Americans, and Chinese. They endured the first and last atomic bombings. The German Wehrmacht gobbled up five Russian armies groups whole — some four million soldiers killed or captured over five months of significant fighting — the consequence of which was that four years later, Hitler committed suicide in his bunker. It is utterly plausible, among the firebombing of cities, dawn of the atomic age, and mechanized warfare, to imagine, as a soldier, that staying awake on guard wasn't going to make much of a difference on any collective individual or level.

Meanwhile, two military police soldiers in Abu Ghraib took pictures of themselves psychologically and physically torturing prisoners, and the world paid attention. Edward Snowden absconded with 250,000 sensitive documents from the NSA, and it had severe repercussions for international relations, repercussions that echo into the present, as former allies and democratic sympathizers such as India and Brazil side with a notorious tyrant (Putin) rather than America. And

I and those like me fought through the dust and wet, humid heat, through thin air in the unforgiving mountains, under our own power, by our own choosing.

After that mission in Kunduz Province in early August, I wrote a letter to one of my best friends. Describing the circumstances surrounding the battle, I wrote that:

We really could've turned the mission into a success if we'd been postured to follow it up, but the way the assets were being committed was too piecemeal, there wasn't any organization or long-term plan. This was my fault. We'd planned to be on the offense for three days, and I made no contingency plans for follow-on operations; we should've planned for more.

The letter is a simple accounting of action, taken by individuals; it is not a nihilistic account wherein the characters are all helpless, subjective or mere tools of an uncaring fate. As it turned out, we were rewarded for the choices we made. Although we had to turn back without accomplishing our objective within the Taliban-held areas, the Afghan police and army came back with a renewed fervor after their mourning was complete, and the story of our desire to fight on their behalf and fight along with them struck a chord with the population. When we returned to our fort after the last day of fighting, the roads of Imam Sahib city were lined with Afghans waving at us — families, children, little girls. Our efforts produced measurable, real effects, and laid a solid foundation that we drew on to go back, and back again, and again, until the Taliban were driven out.

Paul Fussell, an infantryman from WWII and a fine author, wrote a superlative essay for *Harper's Magazine* in 1982 titled "[My War: How I got irony in the infantry](.)." In it, among a great many other example of the roots of his irony (and that of an entire generation), he describes how the worst battle of his life went forgotten because of its relative unimportance

in the overall scheme of WWII:

That day in mid-March that ended me was the worst of all for F Company. We knew it was going to be bad when it began at dawn, just like an episode from the First World War, with an hour-long artillery preparation and a smokescreen for us to attack through. What got us going and carried us through was the conviction that, sufferers as we might, we were at least "making history." But we didn't even do that. Liddell-Hart's 766-page History of the Second World War never heard of us. It mentions neither March 15 nor the 103rd Infantry Division. The only satisfaction history has offered is the evidence that we caused Josef Goebbels some extra anxiety.

In Khanabad, in Imam Sahib, every time we drove down the new, black paved roads, or along the dusty, cratered dirt trails, or walked into the marketplace, we had an immediate and noticeable effect — we were the war. And yet, current war literature like [*The Yellow Birds*](#)by Kevin Powers, asserts the opposite: "The war tried to kill us in the spring." This is a stance that lags behind the truth: The war was us, we chose and made it. And so far as I remember, we weren't trying to kill ourselves.

If one's primary interaction with Iraq or Afghanistan has been watching a [ninety-second clip](#) on the nightly news of a tiny fort being overrun in some nameless valley, or a firefight, or one of the ubiquitous recordings of sleek, black-metal American air power sniffing out and destroying nighttime Taliban infiltrators in [black-and-white](#), I understand how one might conclude that war is sporadic or even forgettable. Maybe for people who were driving up and down the same road in Bradley light tanks, or Abrams, some of them getting blown up, some surviving arbitrarily — maybe for them the war was as absurd and unknowable as it was for Yossarian in a B-24 bomber flying over the skies of Bologna in WWII.

But I did not see absurdity where I was in Afghanistan — at

least, not WWII-Albert-Camus-grade absurdity. I saw people making choices, for good and for ill. In the mountains and valleys, the places where the 173rd, 101st, 82nd, 3rd, 4th, and 10th patrolled, we didn't wage war with a nuanced appreciation for the infinite variables that affected every bullet fired on both sides. When we patrolled — scrambling over sun-baked walls, our poorly-designed, sweat-soaked uniforms ripping under the stress, down rocky, uncertain draws, clambering and dragging ourselves and each other up hills, behind the next piece of cover — it was conscious, earnest. The bullets zipping and *ker-twanging* around us were the least ironic of all. They had one purpose: to instruct each of us how fragile and sporadic a thing we were.

No. What I saw while firing my rifle from the trenches that the mujahedeen or Soviets dug to fight one another years ago was a series of intensely personal battles on a tribal level, for local security. The soldiers, sergeants, and officers I worked with helped stitch together the battles we fought in rural thirty-compound villages (with a solitary stream running through the middle for irrigation) into something bigger: security at a sub-regional level. When you're walking forward, putting one sore, boot-clad foot in front of the next, and you know that the boom of a Taliban rocket-propelled grenade and chatter of Taliban machine-guns is minutes or seconds away, you don't feel (*I* didn't feel) passive. I felt that a thing was about to happen, a thing for which I was partly or wholly responsible.

More often than not, at the end of the day I felt content with what happened. After all, I couldn't account for Kabul, or Washington D.C., or Islamabad — those places with people I'd never see. All I saw was my own little slice of the broader struggle to give Afghans a chance at less corruption, a freer society, and a better justice system. By the time I left Afghanistan for good, the Taliban were gone, and I'd seen two women — *two* — wearing blue jeans in the cities under my unit's

jurisdiction, Imam Sahib and Khanabad. That seemed like progress.

War literature as it stands today describes a kind of war that is foreign to me. According to Tim O'Brien, Tobias Wolff, and their contemporaries, war (*life*) is unknowable, mediated, somehow beyond comprehension (Wolff said that war made him stupider). Would that this were the case today! The fact that Iraq and Afghanistan have been more observed than lived by many citizens helps give the notion of passivity traction. I understand its logical roots, but its day as an organizing principle for war has passed. In fact, it's even worth considering whether the idea of soldier passivity during warfare always existed for its audience at home as a way to defend humans from facing their awful, bestial capability during legal, community-sanctioned violence; a way of denying the things that one permits one's sons and fathers (and now daughters and mothers) to experience. After all, even the legendary warriors of Homer were media constructs — the battle between Hector and Achilles is moderated entirely by the goddess Athena, who selects Achilles as victor.

In the end, I can only write the war I know: to try to characterize human behavior in our own time. I'm indebted to those thinkers who came before, but am free from the constraints of their experiences and successes. The great writers of the past have done their part, but the war literature that will speak truly to this age will be as different from *The Things They Carried* as that great Vietnam story was from *[Slaughterhouse-Five](#)*. There are writers out there right now working on taking contemporary war narratives to the next level — among them are Brian Castner, Phil Klay, Brian Van Reet, Matt Gallagher, Kristen Rouse, and Mike Carson. This emerging generation of writers and war veterans (male and female) act, speak, and write — just as they patrolled, built, and suffered — in full possession of their faculties. Not victims of government or circumstance or

passion, but, rather, agents who are ultimately responsible to themselves, and for their actions.

This is the legacy of the first all-volunteer American army to head overseas: whatever one's feelings on the invasions, the war didn't happen to us. We owned it, start to finish. It was ours — it *is* ours.

Acronyms and 21st Century Conflict

Some useful acronyms by which to understand 21st century conflict:

COIN: Counter Insurgency. Employed by ISAF in Afghanistan from 2003-2010. Broadly speaking, the strategy wherein a friendly force competes with an enemy force for the allegiance and support of a largely-neutral population. Unattractive to militaries because of the numerous paradoxes involved in successfully pursuing the strategy. Very attractive to democracies and advocates of human rights as, ideally, COIN involves pitting humanism and liberal, western ideas against some competing philosophy, and we'd rather believe that, properly marketed, our system will defeat any competing system.

CT: Counter Terror. Employed by ISAF in Afghanistan from 2010-present. Employed around the world by America. Championed most vocally by Vice President Joe Biden. The strategy wherein intelligence (gathered directly by humans or by technological means) identifies actual or potential terrorist threats to the

U.S.A. or any of its allies (or strategic interests, including Russia and China), and that terrorist threat is neutralized. With a bomb or a gun. "Taken off the board." AKA "whack-a-mole" for its apparent ineffectiveness.

DEVGRU: Seal Team Six.

GWOT: Global War on Terror. The Bush Administration's term for the overarching foreign policy strategy that included OEF (the war in Afghanistan) and OIF (the war in Iraq). Intentionally imprecise.

GCO: Global Contingency Operations. The Obama Administration's term for the overarching foreign policy strategy that includes OEF (the war in Afghanistan), and the unnamed operations in Africa, Pakistan, throughout South America and Europe and Southeast Asia. Terrifyingly, even broader and somehow more vague than GWOT.

ISAF: International Security Assistance Force. The group of mostly-NATO countries helping Afghanistan transition from tribal society into modern democracy. Also jokingly known as "I Saw Americans Fighting" among Scandinavian ISAF members.

OEF: Operation Enduring Freedom. The war in Afghanistan.

OIF: Operation Iraqi Freedom. The war in Iraq.

SOCOM: Special Operations Command (the command, now basically obsolete, responsible for organizing Delta, Rangers, Seals, and Special Forces).

TF -: Task Force [blank] — depending on the context, either a Battalion or Brigade-size effort, or a much smaller higher-echelon group of former SOCOM-affiliate soldiers performing deniable missions for which there are no names.

In 1946, George Orwell wrote [an essay](#) about the way politics was impacting the ways in which people used language. The basic idea was that unscrupulous people who had things to hide

were manipulating how we communicated in order to deceive us into supporting people or policies that we would not otherwise want to support. That politicians lie was not a new idea in 1946, and is not surprising today. In a world with enough thermonuclear energy to destroy most life above cockroaches, though, the stakes are a great deal higher.

Orwell refined the ideas he expressed in 1946, and published them in a more broad fashion in *1984*, when he described the language of "Newspeak." The language (a revision of English undertaken by a totalitarian state apparatus) would shift the way people thought by channeling their ability to express certain thoughts in public, the way they exchanged information. Reading "Politics and the English Language" and 1984, it's not difficult to see how Orwell's ideas about thinking and language had evolved. Orwell believed strongly in the potential of democracy and humanism to create morally responsible, ethical, civic-minded individuals, and put his life on the line to that end in the Spanish Civil War, receiving a throat wound that kept him off the front lines of the Second World War.

One of the most important and relevant intellectual legacies that George Orwell bequeathed us was this idea that, either with or without malice, institutions routinely and *deliberately* attempt to shape public thought through language. Nowhere is that more apparent today than in the successive American Presidential Administrations responsible for beginning what we call the "Global War on Terror" (the Bush Administration) and expanding the definition and bureaucratic entrenchment of that war (the Obama Administration). Both Administrations make heavy, almost exclusive use of acronyms to describe every aspect of the conflict, from the weapons used, to the agencies involved, to the nature and scope of the military actions. Orwell would recognize the current "Global Contingency Operations" (GCO) as the apogee of post-modern "Newspeak" in action — a war that is made up of "contingency

operations," less police action than police-intention, less of an effort and more of an idea. Something slippery, hopelessly slick, around which no counter-argument can be mustered.

The acronyms are constantly changing. When I got to Afghanistan, the Taliban were called "ACM," or "Anti-Coalition Militia." Eight months later, they became "AAF," or "Anti-Afghan Forces." A single fighter was a "MAM" or "Military-Aged Male," though many of the soldiers called them "FAGs," or "Fighting Aged Guys." As earlier pointed out, GWOT morphed into GCO sometime mid-2010. The CIA, with too much baggage, has lost much of its actual importance to various TFs, the NSA, DEA, DIA, and DHS, which in their turn will likely change acronyms over the coming years.

The enemy carried AKs and PKMs and RPGs, while we carried M4s, AT4s, M240Bs, SAWs and M4-mounted 203s, which were later swapped out for 320s. HIMARS is good, but getting a GOMAR is bad, although one of the finest, most scrupulous officers I ever served with went on record saying that if you got out of combat without a CIB and a GOMAR, you hadn't done your job properly, a commentary on the higher-level leadership in the Army's unreliability and essential disconnect from events on the ground. One cannot understand the military without speaking its acronyms fluently—and each military branch has a separate set of acronyms, some so different as to be mutually unintelligible.

In short — to wage war on the side of justice and good (America, the west, humanism), one must first master a shifting language of words and acronyms which themselves change every few years or so. I can testify from personal experience that the effort involved in mastering that language is great, especially when one is actually in combat (and therefore not incentivized to do anything with one's energy save decipher the enemy's intentions). Mastering military-speak is the first step in confronting the realities of the war — one cannot effectively protest or criticize without

understanding what it is one is protesting or criticizing. If one lacks the proper words by which to challenge a given political institution — especially when it is in the institution's interests to keep the nature of its goals and efforts obscure — one will simply rail away in a vacuum, doomed to appear to be protesting the last war, or some archaic problem that is irrelevant.

This is why the long-haired Vietnam-era protester seems so sad, so overmatched — he's saying "no war," to which statement the Obama Administration can correctly say "we never declared war, but Iraq, which was begun on false premises by the Bush Administration, has been closed down," and ignore the ongoing engagement in Afghanistan, and the ubiquitous worldwide "Counter-Terror" operations targeting, among others, American citizens. College students and idealists who feel — correctly! — that we should be more careful about how much information we allow our government to collect have to sift through layers of obfuscation before they uncover an acronym — NSA? Not CIA, or DHS? — that gives them an entity, literally an *agency* against which to argue, with which to dispute.

And why, why does any of this matter? Because every political administration understands that if they were to place a new agency inside the Pentagon and advertise it by its true name — in the case of the NSA, for example, the "Office of Monitoring Everything Anyone Does Online to Profile and Preempt Terrorist Attacks," there would presumably be a great deal of blowback. While some polls seem to indicate that a majority of Americans support sacrificing a certain amount of privacy to security, it's not clear to me whether Americans would support such a program or agency — supposing that the majority of the population agrees that one should trump the other, we could have (given knowledge of the NSA's programs) collectively agreed to discuss our way ahead as a nation. Even the CIA — the "Central Intelligence Agency," which I will use as an umbrella acronym for those acronyms I should not divulge to

the public in the interests of national security, could at this point more accurately be called the "CIA / DDSAT," or Central Intelligence Agency / Department of Drone Strikes Against Terrorists." Again, if the public had understood — understood, that we had kill teams in many third world countries, and were targeting individual human beings for assassination, oftentimes based on patterns of behavior, there probably would have been a spirited debate on the subject. These actions were *not kept secret*, but were buried beneath an avalanche of acronyms and double-speak. Newspeak, in fact.

One should not have to offer one's credentials or explain one's love of country when making such a statement, but it still feels obligatory. In an intellectual atmosphere where substance is more important than words, I have to point out that I believe, like Orwell, so strongly in the potential for good in the west and our cultural tradition that I went to war, twice, for it — OEF VIII and OEF X (it may have been XI, I never got a clear answer on that). I believe that my country, a part of the cultural legacy of Kant and Plato, is an especially permissive and forgiving country in which to be a journalist and thinker, and despite the vitriol with which intellectuals are attacked from both the left and the right (the Williamsburg Hipsters on the one hand who see no wrong in President Obama, and the Fox News / Rush Limbaugh apologists on the right who see no wrong with anything the Neocons say or do), you can still live freer here than in any other large country of which I'm aware in the world. We can do better, though, as citizens — we should expect better from our government. Obfuscation and deceit are rife within our political community, and should be done away with. We must begin calling things by their true names again, and if we don't like how they look on paper — we need to be more responsible about how we exercise our global citizenship. On this, Orwell would agree.

Adrian B