Goodbye to Christmas Truces

We have recently passed the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, which has occasioned a fair amount of press coverage looking back at the so-called (and ill-named) “Great War” or “War to End all Wars”. I intend to join this chorus with some of my own thoughts. For many people interested in history, the Second World War is the more interesting one due to its grander scale and its relatively clearly-defined moral force. For me, the First World War holds more interest since it was what I consider a “highly preventable” war that preceded and directly led to the next “necessary” or “just” war (if such a thing does exist, per Saint Augustine, then World War II is surely its closest reification in modern history). To be honest, I would rather consider both wars merely two parts of the same dance of death, punctuated by a short interval of instability (not unlike a modern and truly global version of that first “world war” reported by Thucydides – the Peloponnesian War). In any case, the causes and aftermath of the First World War would be laughingly stupid and unbelievable if they were not already tragically stupid and unbelievable. I am reminded of a quote by Jorge Luis Borges about the 1982 Falklands War, “It is a fight between two bald men over a comb.” In a similar way, we could say that the First World War was a fight between a bunch of spoiled children over who got to use the playroom. Though they all had their own toys, sharing and cooperation were unlearned traits. There is something profoundly important to remember about this tragedy, though sometimes the easiest way to deal with tragedy, if not outrage, stoicism, or escapism, involves a disarming sense of humor and irreverence. All four issues will be dealt with in this essay, in which I will focus on Robert Graves’ *Goodbye to All That,* his memoirs of early life in England up to and after his participation in the trenches of WWI. Graves was a highly prolific poet and author most famous for his fictional rendering of the Julio-Claudian

dynasty in *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. He was born in 1895, making him 19 years old when the war began—a typical age for new officer and soldier recruits. His mother was German and his middle name was von Ranke, which was no small problem considering the bullying nationalistic anti-German hysteria before, during, and after the war, and was one that caused suspicion from bullying schoolmates and later even from fellow soldiers despite his proven competence in battle. This was a smaller version of the same problem faced by fellow writer D.H. Lawrence, a pacifist married to a German who was under de facto house arrest for the entire war.

Goodbye to All That, published 11 years after the Armistice in 1929, was Graves' second work of non-fiction after a biography of his friend T.E. Lawrence called *Lawrence and the Arabs*. By this time, Graves had already published many poetry collections, including poems written before and during the war. The publication of his memoirs came at a time in which the young author had apparently only recently recovered from years of emotional trauma that today we would call PTSD (often called "shell shock"), and the title references what he calls his "bitter leave-taking of England", including its war, its politics, its society and education, and even many of his own family and friends. Here is a representative quote about his post-war experience: "Very thin, very nervous, and with about four years' loss of sleep to make up, I was waiting until I got well enough to go to Oxford on the Government educational grant. I knew that it would be years before I could face anything but a quiet country life. My disabilities were many: I could not use a telephone, I felt sick every time I travelled by train, and to see more than two new people in a single day prevented me from sleeping. I felt ashamed of myself as a drag on Nancy, but had sworn on the very day of my demobilization never to be under anyone's orders for the rest of my life. Somehow I must live by writing." After publication of *Goodbye to All That*, Graves moved to the Spanish island of Majorca were he remained for the rest of his life, except for

a long stay in America to escape the Spanish civil war.

The book is important for its ability to capture, from the point of view of a single individual rather than a comprehensive historian, the passing of one epoch to another that occurred with the First World War—from what has been called the "long 19th century" (or the "belle epoque" if you like) to the "modern age" of which we are still living (or transitioning out of to a still-undefined age). These are mere historical categories, but they tend to capture the turbulence that saw many of the changes to an old world system dating from the French Revolution, or the Middle Ages in some cases, to a new world where possibilities for progress and destruction both expanded exponentially. Graves serves as a paradigm of a certain type of young person (by definition well-educated and middle-class), especially in England but also throughout the West, after the First World War who saw personal shifts in thinking towards more radical ideas like socialism, atheism, feminism, and pacifism based on their first-hand experiences in the trenches, as well as in their jaded view of a society which they discovered to be neither as civilized nor as progressive as they had thought (I think Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, for example, captures this sense from the German perspective).

Graves opens with an account of his family history and early years, with the first line stating his acceptance of the autobiographical convention of starting with earliest memories: witnessing Queen Victoria's 1897 Jubilee, in his case. He spends some time in these chapters detailing his visits to his aristocratic German relatives in their Bavarian castles and against whom he would later take arms.

He attended many public schools (what Americans would call private or prep schools), with the longest tenure at one called Charterhouse. Several anecdotes are given regarding the severity and hypocrisy of the education system he went through. Outdated but still powerful Victorian standards of

morality accomplished little more than to stifle emotional development and foster “immorality”. One such case is his description of the rampant homosexuality in these types of all-boys boarding schools, going so far as to detail his own platonic infatuation with a younger schoolmate. He dwells on his friendship with George Mallory, the famous alpinist who was an older mentor at Charterhouse and later best man at Graves’ wedding. Mallory, who died on Mount Everest in 1924 after possibly being the first person to reach the summit, was mentioned as one of the only people who treated students like humans, which puzzled everyone according to Graves. Also at this time Graves took up boxing as much to defend against bullies as to keep fit, and would later prove useful in proving his manliness (and, thus, his worth) in front of soldiers and superiors alike.

The heart of the book comes in the middle chapters detailing Graves’ time spent on the Western Front. At the outbreak of war, he deferred his matriculation to Oxford University in order to join the army. He was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Welsh Regiment since his family home was in Harlech in northwest Wales. Like so many other young men, he was eager to join in the fighting before the war ended (how many times it is said at the beginning of every war that it will be over “by Christmas”). While the war obviously did not end by December 25, 1914, Graves witnessed the famous Christmas Day truce soon after joining his regiment on the Western Front (he refers to it as the Christmas 1914 fraternization, of which his regiment was among the first to participate). This event, the likes of which are rare in the annals of war, saw the belligerents, German, French, and British, come out of their trenches and join in an unarmed singing of carols and exchange of greetings and gifts. More than anything else, this short-lived sense of shared humanity and brotherhood can be interpreted as soldiers losing the martial spirit and wanting to take back control of some part of their lives, however small or temporary. I spent two Christmases in Afghanistan and well understand the

sentiment of soldiers that comes at times like Christmas in which all that is desired is a temporary break from the stress and trauma of war. Even in 1914, the truce was obviously resented by the generals and politicians, who ensured there would not be a repeat of such non-warlike sentiment the next Easter or following Christmases, as well as by the Press in the involved countries, where no mention was made for at least a week after the event that hundreds of thousands laid down their arms to hobnob with the enemy. The press coverage also distorted and minimized the truce in order to make it seem more freakish and less peaceful than it actually was. The Christmas Day truce lives on in popular memory and culture, however, and this year the British supermarket Sainsbury's went so far as to make a television commercial reenactment of it in which a German and British soldier swap chocolate and biscuits.

One of the central events in the book is the Battle of Loos, a British and French attack on German lines in September 1915 in which a few kilometers of ground changed hands and almost 100,000 men died. It was the first use of poison gas by the British, and also the battle in which Kipling's son went permanently missing in action, prompting that writer of *The Jungle Book* to write the sad poem "My Boy Jack." Graves describes how the gas was euphemistically referred to "the accessory", and how everyone was highly skeptical of its efficacy because its supervisors were university chemistry professors brought in to administer it. Sure enough, "the accessory" was deployed with a headwind coming into the Allied lines, causing the gas to harm the British more than the Germans it was intended for. The battle itself was also an all-around disaster. Graves mentions how, much later in the war when he had been sent home to recover from his wounds, he was asked to give a speech to 3000 incoming Canadian soldiers. "They were Canadians, so instead of giving my usual semi-facetious lecture on 'How to be Happy, Though in the Trenches', I paid them the compliment of telling the real

story of Loos, and what a balls-up it had been, and why – more or less as it has been given here. This was the only audience I have ever held for an hour with real attention. I expected Major Currie to be furious, because the principal object of the Bull Ring was to inculcate the offensive spirit; but he took it well and put several other concert-hall lectures on me after this."

A key feature of *Goodbye to All That* is the farcical and probably invented dialogue, which reads like short theatrical set-pieces. It seems like almost every occasion of reported speech involves a back-and-forth rhythmic dialogue that ends in someone laying a punch-line. Along with the stock characters, this shows the fictionalized nature of Graves' memoirs (a feature which recalls Hemingway's memoir *A Moveable Feast*, or Robert Byron's travel writing masterpiece *The Road to Oxiana*).

One of the most important characters in Graves' book is Siegfried Sassoon, a fellow "war poet" who joined Graves' Royal Welch Fusiliers regiment in 1916 and struck up an immediate friendship. Sassoon published his own three-part fictionalized autobiography in the 1930's with the middle book, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, covering the war. Like Graves, Sassoon had not published any poetry when they met, and Graves' realistic (as opposed to romantic) style influenced his friend. They both published collections before the end of the war. Sassoon was described by Graves as being one of the most courageous men he had ever seen or heard about in his time in the trenches. He tells one story in particular about how Sassoon single-handedly attacked and took control of a German observation trench, then enraged his superiors by not telling anyone about it. He was found two hours later sitting in the German trench reading a book of poetry. Sassoon, like Graves, later suffered a type of nervous breakdown and wrote his famous 1917 "Soldier's Declaration" denouncing the war and the government's incompetent prosecution of it. In this, he

was encouraged by anti-war activists like Bertrand Russell and Ottoline Morrell. Sassoon threw his Military Cross for bravery into a river, though he escaped a court-martial, with Graves' help, and was sent to a hospital to recover from "shell shock". There he met Wilfred Owen, another war poet hugely influenced and encouraged by Sassoon, and who was himself killed on the Western Front one week before the Armistice. I find it worth mentioning that Sassoon and Owen were both gay. Another gay soldier was the Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein who, like Sassoon, volunteered for service at the outbreak of war and demonstrated repeated bravery in battle on the Russian Front to the point of being thought suicidal (which he also was). Such examples make one wonder why gay soldiers in the American military have until recently been considered unfit for service.

One of the most tragic, and understated, events of the book is when three officers of Graves' battalion, and three of his closest friends, were all killed in the same day by shelling and sniper fire. David Thomas, the third member of the trio of poet friends in the battalion, was among the dead. Graves states: "I felt David's death worse than any other since I had been in France, but it did not anger me as it did Siegfried. He was acting transport-officer and every evening now, when he came up with the rations, went out on patrol looking for Germans to kill. I just felt empty and lost." Soon thereafter, he writes: "My breaking-point was near now, unless something happened to stave it off. Not that I felt frightened. I had never yet lost my head and turned tail through fright, and knew that I never would. Nor would the breakdown come as insanity; I did not have it in me. It would be a general nervous collapse, with tears and twitchings and dirtied trousers; I had seen cases like that."

Graves finished his time in the trenches during the 1916 Battle of the Somme, being injured so gravely as to be reported dead. He spent the rest of the war convalescing in

hospitals, helping train new volunteers to his unit, and even being posted to Ireland where the English garrison was trying to stop (unsuccessfully, it turned out) the burgeoning Irish uprising. The rest of the book talks about his marriage to a feminist activist, their move to the country near Oxford, setting up house, opening a general store ("The moral problems of trade interested me. Nancy and I both found it very difficult at this time of fluctuating prices to be really honest; we could not resist the temptation of under-charging the poor villagers of Wootton, who were frequent customers, and recovering our money from the richer residents. Playing at Robin Hood came easily to me. Nobody ever detected the fraud"), and having four children in eight years (possibly the most amazing fact of the autobiography; he mentions at this point how sometimes he would only scrape out half an hour or so of writing a day in between his fatherly and household care taking duties—we can well imagine).

In this later part he also deals at length with his friendship with T.E. Lawrence, whose biography he wrote just before *Goodbye to All That*. Here are, in my opinion, two of the most important quotes from that chapter: "I knew nothing definite of Lawrence's wartime activities, though my brother Philip had been with him in the Intelligence Department at Cairo in 1915, making out the Turkish Order of Battle. I did not question him about the Revolt, partly because he seemed to dislike the subject – Lowell Thomas was now lecturing in the United States on 'Lawrence of Arabia' – and partly because of a convention between him and me that the war should not be mentioned: we were both suffering from its effects and enjoying Oxford as a too-good-to-be-true relaxation. Thus, though the long, closely-written foolscap sheets of *The Seven Pillars* were always stacked in a neat pile on his living-room table, I restrained my curiosity. He occasionally spoke of his archaeological work in Mesopotamia before the war; but poetry, especially modern poetry, was what we discussed most." And the other: "Lawrence's rooms were dark and oak-panelled, with a

large table and a desk as the principal furniture. There were also two heavy leather chairs, simply acquired. An American oil-financier had come in suddenly one day when I was there and said: ‘I am here from the States, Colonel Lawrence, to ask a single question. You are the only man who will answer it honestly. Do Middle-Eastern conditions justify my putting any money in South Arabian oil?’ Lawrence, without rising, quietly answered: ‘No.’ ‘That’s all I wanted to know; it was worth coming for. Thank you, and good day!’ In his brief glance about the room he missed something and, on his way home through London, chose the chairs and had them sent to Lawrence with his card.” I find these scenes moving and relevant.

The book ends in 1929, though shortly after he divorced his first wife, and got married and had four more children with his poetic muse, Laura Riding, with whom he established a publishing company at their base on Majorca. He was runner-up to the Nobel Prize in Literature won by Steinbeck, and he died at the age of 90 with 140 published works.

The whole of Graves’ memoirs is filled with stories of understated and cynical humor, and pathos. In one case, he describes the last time he attended church which was during his Easter 1916 visit home. He tells a story of having to push his mother uphill in an heavy bath chair, since the only available wheelchair in town was taken by “Countess of-I-forget-what”, and then sit through a three-hour service despite being ill himself. About the ordeal he writes: “I forgot my father’s gout, and also forgot that passage in Herodotus about the two dutiful sons who yoked themselves to an ox-cart to pull their mother, the priestess, to the Temple and were oddly used by Solon, in a conversation with King Croesus, as a symbol of ultimate happiness.” During the sermon the “strapping” young curate, one of four men present—compared with 75 women—was “bellowing about the Glurious Performances of our Sums and Brethren in Frurnce today. I decided to ask him afterwards why, if he felt like that, he wasn’t himself

either in Frurnce or in khurki." His father then took him to meet War Secretary (and future Prime Minister) David Lloyd-George, who Graves says "was up in the air on one of his 'glory of the Welsh hills' speeches. The power of his rhetoric amazed me. The substance of the speech might be commonplace, idle, and false, but I had to fight hard against abandoning myself with the rest of his authence. He sucked power from his listeners and spurted it back at them. Afterwards, my father introduced me to Lloyd George, and when I looked closely at his eyes they seemed like those of a sleep-walker." It is worth mentioning that Graves' book angered so many people that even his father, one of the offended, felt it necessary to write his own memoirs as a rebuttal to his son's entitled *To Return to All That*.

While I have enjoyed and profited from reading "big" history, *Goodbye to All That* is a great example of the importance and edification of reading individual accounts of history. I always find autobiographies of great and famous people illuminating for the perspective it helps give to their time period. Though I have studied history and literature, I am no scholar and seek mostly entertainment and self-improvement in my reading. I will leave it to others to argue more convincingly the faults or short-comings of books like Graves' or Sassoon's memoirs (Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* comes to mind, which Mike Carson has already discussed at length on this website here), but I personally find such personal accounts interesting and instructive.

Regarding a sense of humor towards destructive war declared by elites and suffered by the common man, I think it is not only in bad taste but can do more harm than good by normalizing the illegality and immorality of the war. Thus, I agree with this quote by Bertrand Russell, a pacifist who spent the last year of World War One in prison for speaking against involuntary military service for conscientious objectors: "Alas, I am that extremely rare being, a man without a sense of humour. I had

not suspected this painful fact until the middle of the Great War, when the British War Office sent for me and officially informed me of it. I gathered that if I had had my proper share of a sense of the ludicrous, I should have been highly diverted at the thought of several thousand young men a day being blown into tiny little bits, which, I confess to my shame, never once caused me to smile. I am reminded of a Chinese emperor, who long ago constructed a lake made entirely of wine, and then drove his peasants into it only to amuse his wife with the struggles of their drunken drownings. Now he had a sense of humor."

Regarding a sense of humor, which can only be “dark” or cynical, by veterans against their war which may be a way to ease the personal trauma and represent, even fictionalized, the collective tragedy in which they played a part, I look up to Graves and his successors such as Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, who have highly influenced the field of war literature.

Regarding the causes of destructive (and self-destructive) wars like WWI, I will leave it once more with the wise and quotable Bertrand Russell, writing here in his book *Education and the Social Order* about the innate violent sense of retributive justice that is easily awakened in humans: “I found one day in school a boy of medium size ill-treating a smaller boy. I expostulated, but he replied: ‘The bigs hit me, so I hit the babies; that’s fair.’ In these words he epitomised the history of the human race.” One of the things that makes us human is the ability to laugh in the face of the tragically absurd, and continue living in spite of it. Graves in this book has done just that, making his book a classic not only in the genre of war literature but in modern literature as a whole.

American Sniper and the Hero Myth

American Sniper, a new film based on the book of the same name, is being released on Christmas Day. Directed by Clint Eastwood and starring and produced by Bradley Cooper, it tells the story of Navy SEAL super-sniper Chris Kyle, widely-praised as the most lethal sniper in American history with at least 160 "official" kills, and apparently many more "unofficial" ones. The film's catch phrase is "the most lethal sniper in history", and the trailer shows Bradley Cooper undergoing a moment of moral doubt before (presumably) shooting a child carrying a bomb. The Hollywood studio is banking not only on the film's popularity, but that Americans will want to spend their Christmas Day watching such morally questionable lethality. The trailer immediately reminds me of another Bradley Cooper role in *The Place Beyond the Pines* (a much better movie than *American Sniper*, by the way), where Cooper's entire character is built around the fact that he killed a man with a young son the same age as his own and felt guilt and regret for the rest of his life.

Digression about the title *American Sniper*: why are there so many films beginning with "American" something or other? Cooper has already starred in one such movie only a year earlier than this one (*American Hustle*), and then we have *American Psycho*, *American Beauty*, *American Pie*, *American Gangster*, *American History X*, *American Outlaws*, and many, many more. I understand that the double iambic rhythm of America's adjectival form lends an especially strong sound that leads to strong titles, and it is hard to find any other nationality adjectives which convey such emphasis (the few scattered examples are exotic rather than emphatic: *The French*

Connection, The Italian Job, The English Patient, The African Queen, The Manchurian Candidate, The Good German. Even here we see the definite article almost without exception, which is never necessary with "American"). Rather than exotic, titles beginning with "American" are meant to be paradigmatic of something true and universal and worthy of such a phonologically forceful appellation. We can speculate that Kyle, in choosing the title for his war memoirs, intended to tap into this paradigm with himself representing the ideal Platonic form of "sniper" or "killer" by means of his qualitative Americanness. It is beyond doubt that director Clint Eastwood and the Hollywood producers agreed.

Moving back to the original story, after 10 years in the military and four tours in Iraq, the real-life Chris Kyle left the Navy in 2009 and started a private security consulting firm in his home state of Texas. One of his priorities was supporting wounded and troubled veterans. When his book was published, he donated the entire $1.5 million check to charities supporting such veterans. He was a devoted family man as well as a noted gun-lover and hunter (it remains unclear whether he killed more human or non-human animals).

Kyle, along with a friend, was killed in 2013 by a troubled ex-Marine who shot him in the back when Kyle took him for his own brand of "therapy" at a shooting range. The funeral was held at the Cowboys Stadium in Dallas to accommodate the huge number of mourners. This man was a hero to millions of people in America. My purpose is not to disrespect Kyle in any way, but to point out some of my thoughts and observations about the circumstances which lead him to become such a hero to so many.

It is obvious that Kyle was a conflicted individual, which is perfectly understandable if we consider the inhuman amount of death and bloodshed he was involved in. Many veterans return from war with PTSD, often despite never even firing a shot or being shot at. War is traumatic, and the training and mindset

that prepares an individual for war can sometimes be even more dehumanizing. I recognize the goodwill Kyle felt towards other veterans, but should it be considered the wisest decision to bring a suicidal, mentally-unstable veteran whom you had never met to a shooting range? Kyle's death, while tragic, is not surprising. Jesus Christ reportedly said "live by the sword, die by the sword". Kyle, a lover of guns, personally killed hundreds of humans with guns. Is it shocking that such a story should end in his own death by gun? Kyle was also a proud Christian man who must have fallen into confusion about the meaning of his Lord's words extolling pacifism. He had more of a mentally of Crusader-against-the-infidel Christian than a turn-the-other-cheek one. Yet this is beside the point as he was not the first man to justify his violence through his religious beliefs, and he won't be the last.

Another relevant thing I found out is that Kyle never expressed any regret or doubt over killing people on such a Herculean scale (here is a quote from his book: "It was my duty to shoot, and I don't regret it. The woman was already dead. I was just making sure she didn't take any Marines with her."). One must imagine that it would become quite routine after a while to aim, shoot, and repeat. This is no video game, however, nor is it aerial bombing, artillery, or even run-of-the-mill machine-gun fire. Every one of those kills Kyle would have previously and skillfully planned, calculated, and then witnessed in gory detail by means of a powerful telescope sight. That such a thing would be desensitizing is understandable. I would not take such a job, but if it were me I would also by necessity strengthen my personal convictions about my own righteousness if only as a way to avoid insanity (another quote from the book: "My shots saved several Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman's twisted soul. I can stand before God with a clear conscience about doing my job.").

There appear to be some unsavory parts of Kyle's story. First

of all, I must ask myself why Navy SEALs and other special operations guys call themselves “silent professionals” when there is nothing silent about the stream of lucrative book deals and Hollywood productions involving former Navy SEALs and their ilk telling all the dirty secrets about their work (which is to say, how efficient they are at killing other humans). Kyle’s book and movie are just one of an entire sub-genre which the French philosopher Jean Beaudrillard would label “war porn”, and its popularity in the military and American society as a whole is revealing. Just as in similarly violent video games, the wide-eyed reader/viewer can excitedly imagine himself killing everybody in sight and single-handedly saving the day/winning the war. Such a mindset, while quite common, is psychologically unhealthy for individuals, and politically unhealthy for a democracy.

Kyle also had problems telling the truth. Though apparently no stranger to garden-variety barroom brawls, he invented a story about a bar fight in which he punched out former wrestler, actor, and Minnesota governor (and fellow Navy commando) Jesse Ventura. Ventura sued and was eventually awarded over a million dollars in damages. Kyle also apparently made up a story about killing two guys who tried to rob him somewhere in Texas, which never happened in real life. I wonder why he would feel the need to make up superfluous falsehoods when he was already well-supplied with enough martial anecdotes to win admiration from his armed acolytes. It reeks of the braggadocio and machismo that is all-too-common in the special operations communities. He was also a heavy drinker, like many fellow veterans. Alcohol is one of the most common and most readily available means for veterans to cope with the trauma of war and homecoming. Sadly, we should not be surprised by such a man leading a violent life, even if he is by no means alone.

The idea of the Hero is one that is as old as humanity, and well-documented in the ancient stories of Heracles and

Achilles on down the line. Thomas Carlyle famously popularized a theory of hero worship whose exemplars were nevertheless praised as much for their cultural and literary feats as for their martial and political prowess. Likewise, we will not find today's ersatz heroes in the pages of Nietzsche, whose morally-transcendent, classically-trained heroes would come to rule over the common rabble. The current American myth of the hero is not so sophisticated as its predecessors, whatever their flaws. If we think about Joseph Campbell's famous theory of the monomyth, Chris Kyle could, through the narrative of his book and the film, be seen to follow the universal mythical paradigm of departure, initiation, and return. The thing about Campbell's theory, though, is that it applies to the myths that human societies create, but not to human societies and individuals themselves. In other words, we create the myths that we want to believe. The myth of Chris Kyle and the hero protecting their freedom from evil-doers is one which many Americans would like to believe.

Like I said, Kyle, for all his personal problems, is not himself the problem, but a symptom of a larger problem. He was just doing his job, as horrible as that job was. The real problem is with the segment of society that glorifies this behavior as heroic, holding up Kyle in particular as a super-hero. I think it is twisted logic that holds up people like Kyle, and soldiers in general, as heroes while failing to question the cause or need for war and violence in the first place. In fact, if it has not been clearly enunciated up to this point, I do not care much at all for the term "hero". Heroes are for people who see the world as black and white, good guys and bad guys, us versus them, without much thought for nuance or second-order effects (another telling quote from the book: "Savage, despicable evil. That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy "savages." There really was no other way to describe what we encountered there."). I think it is no coincidence that super-hero movies are especially popular at

the moment—the desire for super-heroes in adults comes from the same line of thinking, and the same weakness of critical thinking, that produces hero worship. This same line of thinking also enables the propaganda and social and political environment which facilitates war and stifles dissent against it.

Chris Kyle was no super-hero, let alone hero, though many people (and maybe he himself) saw him as one. The world needs neither fake heroes nor mythical super-heroes with super-human powers or super-human killing ability to be able to solve the world's problems or kill all of the bad guys. The society that produced Chris Kyle and his unquestioning world view will sustain itself with tales of heroes like Chris Kyle who defend our "freedom" from the bad guys. The thing about bad guys is that, to them, the other guys are bad guys, and they are fighting for their own version of "freedom". Killing over 200 "bad guys" is just as ineffective a way to peace or freedom as killing two million "bad guys" if there is no reason why and no plan to stop killing them. This false heroism creates more problems than it solves and multiplies the violence in the world. Chris Kyle did not protect or make anyone safer; his story is one small part of immoral (and probably illegal) war that has only increased the vicious cycle of violent retribution that exists in the world. Such a cycle will continue until someone, dare I say one akin to a real "hero", tries to stop the cycle with understanding, dialogue, and diplomacy. The world does not need heroes; it needs human solidarity.

Yes, We Tortured Some Folks

By now everyone in the world has heard about the recently released U.S. Senate Torture Report, which details the shocking and mind-numbing inhumanity of the torture program sanctioned by the Bush administration and operated by the C.I.A. after 9/11. With the appearance of this new report, there has been an enormous amount of press coverage and commentary in America and around the world, which must be considered a victory for freedom of speech, press, and information. One representative example of good reporting on this case is this recent New York Times article. The more we understand and discuss this issue, the better we can avoid ever repeating the same crimes* (I use this word rather than the more euphemistic "mistakes", as in the common *newspeak* example "mistakes were made", as can be seen in the C.I.A. director's unrepentent rebuttal to the report).

The issue of torture is one that has troubled me for some time. At a press conference last year, American President Barack Obama uttered the phrase "We tortured some folks." While this acknowledgement was a small step in the right direction in admitting the possible existence of responsibility and guilt in the highest levels of government, it is troubling in its own ways. First of all, the phrasing itself is incongruous, with the transitive verb "torture" being followed by the unlikely direct object phrase "some folks". Obama has most likely been advised by his speaking coaches to use more down-to-earth vocabulary like "some folks" in order to seem less "professorial" and more simple "middle American" (in America, there is a prevalent view that the best way to win votes is to appear as normal and mediocre as possible). Anyway, "some folks" is not a phrase that should follow "tortured". I have enough trouble imagining people being tortured who may be actual terrorists without also having to imagine the torture of average innocent "folks".

The second problem with Obama is that he apparently tried to stop, delay, or water-down the Senate Torture Report for reasons slightly mystifying. Obama famously cancelled his predecessor's torture program in his first week in office and has often said how he disagrees with what was done (notice the use of the passive voice). The only reason he would stand in the way of this report is respectful fear of the intelligence community, namely the C.I.A. And I don't blame him—the C.I.A. scares me a lot more than any actual terrorist organization. Even as an American citizen who is ostensibly "protected" by the C.I.A. because of my natural born citizenship, I am still somewhat fearful of attempting to openly criticize this organization by describing in greater detail its long criminal history. Its crimes are so widespread over the course of its entire seven-decade history that the only shocking thing is that more people in America do not know or care anything about what is done by such powerful and unaccountable organizations in the name of their security. In fact, in many countries in the world, where the C.I.A. has supported assassinations, regime change, torture, and state-sponsored violence, it is quite strongly believed to be an evil terrorist organization in itself, but in America people still believe the old lie that it protects Americans' safety and interests. A revealing fact is that for the first time ever the director of the C.I.A., currently John Brennan, has testified in front of a Senate hearing. In a long and sordid history, the governing body overseeing this organization has never resorted to a public investigative hearing until now. What we do know is that not only is this one of the most unsupervised and counter-productive of publicly-funded American agencies, but also one of the most flagrantly dishonest, with lies covering up deceptions covering up misinformation. No matter if it is spinning counter-intelligence abroad or testifying in front of elected lawmakers, we can be sure that the lies run deep. The proper thing to do would be to disband the C.I.A. and start over with a smaller and less problematic intelligence agency.

The details of the torture report, which is 6000 pages in length, of which 500 are declassified, are so harrowing and brutal that I do not want to mention them here. They have been widely reported and the readers are encouraged to look into it further if you have not already. Or just take my word for it that it is worse than you can imagine. There is something about torture that is more emotional and horrifying than anything else we can imagine. Thinking about humans, even ones possibly guilty of some crime or another, being tortured by other humans makes my stomach turn and makes me want to break down and cry. Thinking that it was done repeatedly to humans who sometimes committed no crime at all is too much to bear. Accordingly, this article is being written in a haphazard way, guided by my emotions and my wandering train of thought rather than in well-ordered paragraphs. In his book *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Richard Rorty often repeats the claim of Judith Shklar that "liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do…the willful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear…or the willful infliction of a certain kind of nonphysical pain called humiliation." That quote has stuck with me, not because of its political context, but because of its ethical ramifications.

For years after 9/11, we heard about how torture was necessary if it allowed us to stop "the next attack". The word torture was never used—it was defined as "enhanced interrogation techniques" for obvious euphemistic reasons—and the media never challenged the new fear narrative that gripped the country. The use of language can be a powerful tool in the hands of media and politicians, and they knew that there would be less concern about something labelled "enhanced interrogation techniques" than there would be for the much more visual and visceral "torture". We could similarly rebrand the death penalty as "enhanced state-run life-taking procedure", or war as "enhanced state-sanctioned attack and defense system". In this kind of Orwellian *newspeak*, meaning

is both hidden and meaningless at the same time. It is no coincidence that TV programs like “24” were popular in these years. I never watched it, but I am aware of its false glorification and justification of the use of torture because the soldiers around me during my deployments were often prone to become obsessed with certain TV shows and binge watch an entire series in a week. The truth, which we can see clearly now that the fear has passed and some of our rationality has slowly come creeping back, is that torture never stopped the next attack, and that there never was and never will be any legal justification for torture.

Even now, after the release of this report, the torture apologists have crawled out of their caves insisting on the same lies, as though even had all of this torture stopped a single attack, it would have been worth it. It is telling that cowardly men like former Vice President Dick Cheney (who avoided military service at all costs) refuse to acknowledge regret for the black tide of illegal war and immoral acts they duped the country into, yet men like John McCain, who was tortured as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, remain firmly against it due to hard-lived experience and certainty of its inefficacy and immorality. It is also troubling that no less than a Supreme Court justice has justified the case for torture using the ticking time bomb situation (Antonin Scalia's Case for Torture) and saying things like "I think it's facile for people to say, 'Oh, torture is terrible.'" Yes, it's facile because it is terrible, and illegal, and immoral.

The philosophy of utilitarianism derived from Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill is a useful and interesting moral calculus for certain types of situations. In certain cases, the best thing to do is the one in which the most number of people will benefit or be happy. We can stretch this even into financial considerations of how to best spend money in a way which will benefit the most number of people. This should be

considered one tool among many to weigh the merits and demerits of a particular decision, but not a hard and fast ethical rule. Doing so leads us into any number of thought experiments where we are playing with human lives and trying to decide the most moral thing to do. Utilitarianism is one form of consequentialism, which basically says that the benefit of an action is decided by its consequences, and not in the action itself. Thus, with the famous trolley car thought experiment, we are asked whether we will shift a runaway train onto a track where it will kill only one man instead of five. Though some will disagree, these types of problems are a proverbial "bridge too far" in the field of ethics. Once human life is involved, rather than mere lifestyle or economic questions, the equation changes. It becomes more emotional, more blurry, less calculable. If I was asked to kill one man to save five, or even to save 100, I am not sure that I could do it. That is exactly the situation presented in John Fowles' book, *The Magus*. The Nazis on a Greek island (it is also no coincidence that Nazis and torture are our two ubiquitous subjects for testing the extreme limits of various ethical positions) gave the character a choice of shooting three men in order to save the village, but he could not pull the trigger. When we are asked to do the dirty deed, or to unjustly take human life, something changes in the consequentialist calculus and the ends no longer justify the means.

In the system of ethics devised by Immanuel Kant, "duty" ethics, a man is called to do his duty by acting so that his action will make a universal law. This so-called categorical imperative calls for us to never treat someone as a means to an end, but rather an end in himself. There are holes in this line of thinking, especially that it is too categorical (for example, Kant would have us tell the truth even if a lie protected a loved one from harm), and that what a man wills can differ from person to person (for example, what was willed by the Nazis into being universal law is not what we want to

represent our infallible sense of morality). What I take from Kant's system is his dignity for humanity and for each person existing as an end rather than a means. This is important. Paradoxically, torture cannot be justified in a Kantian system of ethics since it violates personal sovereignty and dignity, yet National Socialism could be justified if it was willed into being as the representation of universal law by a society.

Back to modern times, this brief synopsis was intended to give some philosophical perspective, but I must insist, against certain consequentialist philosophers, some film and TV producers, and some politicians that there is no situation in which torture can be justified. Ever. A situation will not arise in which torture is necessary for any reason. There is no ticking time bomb. There are no lives to save. It is all dissimulation in order to maintain some sense of power and control by the torturer. "The torturer", in this case, must be understood to represent not America as a whole, but a certain specific regime that controlled America for some years before losing democratic election. Since torture is not only immoral in all circumstances, but also illegal according to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and many other national and international laws, someone should rightfully be held accountable for such crimes. In comparable historical contexts, I would not hold the modern countries of Chile and Argentina accountable for the crimes and torture inflicted by the authoritarian regimes of Pinochet and Videla, to name just two examples; the responsibility is of those who held power and made decisions first and foremost. On the other hand, these countries renounced the crimes of their dictator regimes and prosecuted anyone who was involved whenever possible. This raises the question of prosecuting members of the Bush administration and the C.I.A. leadership for crimes against humanity. It is an open question in which I will leave to the legal authorities and scholars whether it is legally possible or politically wise, but I think it is safe to say that the

torture report is a step in the right direction, but seeing high-ranking abusers of power on trial would be an even more powerful statement than a partially declassified report.

It is also troubling that while Obama has refused to prosecute anyone for admitted crimes, saying things like "it's important to look forward and not backwards" (do they ever say that about any other situation where someone committed a crime?), the only person who has been prosecuted in the C.I.A. torture case is the person who leaked information about it to the press. His name is John Kiriakou, and he is currently serving a 30-month prison sentence for leaking information about illegal activity, while the illegal activity itself goes unpunished.

Lastly, I would like to briefly speculate on the principles behind the practice of torture which, in my opinion, comes from the corrupt desire to exert complete power and control over another living being. One of the best books I've read that deals with torture is the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* by Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee. Bertrand Russell, in his 1938 book *Power: A New Social Analysis*, attempted to define a new sociology based on power being the supreme guiding principle of social science. He says, "The ultimate power of the Law is the coercive power of the State. It is the characteristic of civilised communities that direct physical coercion is (with some limitations) the prerogative of the State, and the Law is a set of rules according to which the State exercises this prerogative in dealing with its own citizens". Here, we can understand his "direct physical coercion" to include not only torture but police brutality, war (including the violence it brings to combatants and non-combatants alike), and the death penalty. Most of these things are done legally because it is the prerogative of the state which makes its own laws. Torture, though illegal according to the U.N. Charter of Human Rights and many international treaties, is the only form of violence which is exercised

merely as a form of total control over an individual. This key characteristic of totalitarianism comes from the corrupting influence of unchecked power. As Dostoyesky (a former prisoner) once said, "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." While this quote could easily apply to modern-day America, we could paraphrase it by saying "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by how those in power treat those without power." If the answer is to torture with impunity, then we are no longer living in civilization but in hell.

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.

The Espionage Act and the Cult of Secrecy

The most important compromise that allowed for the passage of the U.S. Constitution was that there be included a series of amendments called the Bill of Rights, which guaranteed certain freedoms to the individual, a counterpoint to the Articles of the Constitution itself which merely delineated the powers of the branches of government. The most important and revolutionary of the amendments was the first, which simultaneously protected from government censure the individual free exercise of religion, freedom of speech and of the press, and freedom to peaceably assemble and petition. These freedoms are the bedrock of civil liberties and have become universally accepted as the preeminent hallmarks of a

free society. In practice, however, there have always been difficulties interpreting the limits of these so-called individual freedoms in relation to the authority of the State. This is especially true in times of war, in which it has often been supposed that nothing, not even freedom of speech or of the press, can stand in the way of State security, secrecy, and success in the war effort. Though these individual freedoms have been enshrined into the U.S. Constitution as the foremost rights of the citizenry, there have been many setbacks and the long battle to protect these very freedoms continues even into the present day.

For example, only seven years after the ratification of the First Amendment, John Adams signed into law the Sedition Act of 1798 in which it was made illegal to write or say anything "false, scandalous, or malicious" against the government. The legal basis for this was that, while freedom of speech was allowed, it did not mean freedom from prosecution for seditious or "dangerous" speech after the fact. This would seem to seriously undermine the notion of free speech itself. Moving forward in history we come to another similar piece of legislation that is still enforced and impacts us directly today, and which will be the focus of the rest of this essay: the Espionage Act of 1917.

Woodrow Wilson, after campaigning in 1916 on the fact that he had "kept us out of war", was elected to a second term as president and immediately brought America into World War One in 1917. Three months later, Wilson signed into law the Espionage Act, in which it was punishable by death or 30 years in prison to convey information that would interfere with the success of the military or promote the success of its enemies. This included the intent to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, refusal of duty, or even to obstruct the recruitment of conscripts into the military. It was also intended to silence all dissent against the war, to monitor and punish any pro-German or anti-British sympathies, and to block the

distribution of printed materials through the Post Office (this was a time in which the Post Offices were one of the most extensive arms of the federal government throughout the states and the Postmaster General was actually an influential and powerful position—made more powerful by being able to block or intercept anything sent through the mail). The Espionage Act has been amended many times since 1917, and is arguably stronger than ever in our own time. In 1933 a provision was added to prohibit the disclosure of anything sent in code; in 1961 a provision was removed that had restricted the law's jurisdiction to U.S. territory or to American citizens; at least two times it was amended to increase the penalties it imposed; in 1950, during the McCarthy era and the growing militarization of the Cold War, the McCarren Internal Security Act changed the scope of possible crimes from the "intent" to harm or aid to "mere retention" of information. Not only open and free speech, but even secret information are now under the control of the Espionage Act.

Government authorities wasted no time after the law's passage to begin enforcement. A disproportionate number of its victims were Socialists and members of unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World, which were strongly against American intervention in the war. Eugene V. Debs, the four-time Socialist candidate for President, was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison for making a speech that "obstructed recruiting". Even a film called *The Spirit of '76* was seized and its producer imprisoned and fined; apparently the film portrayed too much British cruelty during the American Revolution which could undermine support for the current close American ally in the war effort. After the war, the law was invoked in order to arrest and deport several hundred foreign socialists and anarchists, allegedly due the bombing of Attorney General's house by an anarchist agent. If you are wondering how this broad limitation of free speech held up at the Supreme Court, I will direct you to the 1919 case of

Schenck v. United States in which the Court decided that the law was justified if such speech constituted a "clear and present danger" to the government, the same as if a man shouted "Fire" in a crowded theatre according to the famous Justice Oliver Holmes. Schenck had denounced the war conscription law as "involuntary servitude" and his arrest as an abridgment of freedom of speech and of the press. Rather than Justice Holmes' "fire", could we consider Schenck's act more like warning people of a fire in the theatre before entering? Is not war itself a "clear and present danger", much more dangerous than a mere argument against it? What is the fine line in which citizens are allowed to object to war without creating a danger to the government?

During the Cold War, the McCarren Act and the red-baiting of Senator McCarthy breathed new life into the Espionage Act. While the Act was originally intended to apply only during wartime, it has been continuously in force since 1950 – the long years of the Cold War, the permanent militarization of American policy and economy, and even the recent "War on Terror" show how far such justifications can be stretched to protect the government from its own citizens (not vice versa, which is the ideal). Public speech and print have been superseded by the possession of secret information as the main focus of the law. In 1971, Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo were charged under the Espionage Act of publishing classified documents that came to be known as the Pentagon Papers. They consisted 7000 pages of top secret records of the Department of Defense's involvement in the Vietnam from the 1940s-70s, leaked by Ellsberg and Russo to the New York Times because of their indignation about the crimes of the United States against the people of Vietnam. The Nixon administration attempted to block the publication but it was ruled freedom of speech by the Supreme Court; the administration then indicted the leakers under the Espionage Act. They would have almost certainly been convicted and served long sentences but were instead released because of a legal technicality – the

Watergate scandal that caused Nixon's downfall came about when Nixon's henchmen tried to steal compromising information about Ellsberg from his psychiatrist's office. The Pentagon Papers case obviously had major historical ramifications, but also made it clear that the government considered the distribution of secret information to the press for the purpose of exposing secrets of the same government to be espionage. We must ask ourselves which is the worse crime: sanctioning injustice, oppression, and murder around the world, or the disclosure of these secret indiscretions to the public?

The final section of this essay concerns the recent cases of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, both of which are related to the Pentagon Papers case. Manning has been sentenced to 35 years in prison for violating the Espionage Act by stealing government intelligence and diplomatic cables that revealed governmental corruption and giving them to WikiLeaks to be published. Edward Snowden has been charged with violating the Espionage Act for stealing and publishing secret government information that revealed the extent of the widespread secret surveillance powers of the National Security Agency. Just as the Pentagon Papers, the crimes of Manning and Snowden only involved the transmission of information to the public that had been classified by the government as secret.

There are a few issues at play that we can discuss after this brief historical synopsis of the Espionage Act. You will have noticed the prevalence of the word "secret" in the examples I mentioned. It seems that the pervasive cloud of government secrecy is an excuse for any number of illegal or immoral acts to be committed. The reason the Pentagon Papers, the Manning leaks, and the Snowden leaks are such captivating events is not only that they reveal secrets protected by the state, but that the revealed contents of these state secrets are so shocking to the public. The government naturally wants the focus to be on the importance of maintaining secrecy and the punishment for violation of the Espionage Act, but polls show

that the public is much more concerned with the harmful content of the secrets than the comparatively harmless crime of revealing them (harmless except to the reputation of the government). This is because the government is intended to be "of the people, by the people, and for the people", and many people still hold this democratic ideal close to heart. When it is revealed how much the government hides from its citizens, we have the right to be shocked, outraged, and demand accountability; the people to be held accountable are not the ones whose conscience and sense of moral outrage drove them to provide us with the secrets, however, and they should probably be rewarded rather than punished.

Another aspect is the fine line between Freedom of Speech and state security. The Espionage Act and the cases above show exactly where the line stands between what is considered the right to free speech and what is considered the government's prerogative to limit any expression that supposedly endangers state security. In my opinion, there is a clear solution to this problem, which is the absolute protection of Freedom of Speech and the other freedoms of the First Amendment. Whenever state security is invoked in order to limit fundamental rights, it is a slippery slope that takes us further away from the idea of the open democratic society towards something on the opposite end of the spectrum that could be called either tyranny, fascism, or totalitarianism. If we imagine George Orwell's *1984* today, there would surely be a Ministry of Freedom which would limit Freedom of Speech to active daily repetition of the mantra: "War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength."

Additionally, we should remember that a feature of the Espionage Act, however we feel about it, was that it was only meant to be enforceable and enforced during "wartime". This is a crucial point if we consider that the traditional idea of wartime changed after World War II to be replaced with the idea of the continuous "Cold War", or the state of being

permanently on war footing against global enemies. The militarization of the American economy was central to its growth and success in the post-World War II years, and was important for protecting American corporate profits around the world. This did not change after the end of the Cold War; the Clinton Administration determined that the U.S. military must be able to fight two regional conflicts simultaneously, the Bush and Obama years have seen the invention and proliferation of the ill-conceived concept of the War on Terror. There are also at least 800 American bases and military installations in at least 156 countries around the world (link). If this still does not qualify as a permanent state of war, it is surely a state of hyper-militarization against enemies more imagined than real. It must be mentioned that the type of state and military secrets revealed by the aforementioned cases are not tactical, operational, or strategic in nature – I am not advocating something akin to reporting on troop movements to the Germans during World War II; rather, these are systemic and institutional secrets that hide crimes and corruption of government agencies and their corporate partners. In comparison, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted and executed under the Espionage Act for purportedly providing the Soviet Union with plans for nuclear weapons. However dubious the evidence against them, the nature of the crime is different from the argument I am attempting to make; giving detailed military information or weapons to hostile nations or groups is something else entirely from revealing moral injustices and atrocities of a government to its own people in the name of transparency and justice.

Let us now consider the Patriot Act and the system of state surveillance. In the weeks after 9/11, the Bush Administration and Congress created and easily passed a new law with the Orwellian name of the Patriot Act, which allows for a very broad interpretation of government access to any information that it claims could be used to maintain security (The Obama administration and a new Congress easily renewed the law in

2011). The last decade and a half has seen a huge expansion of the state security apparatus in general, headlined by agencies such as the new Department of Homeland Security, the infamous CIA, and the venerable National Security Agency (there are at least 16 separate government intelligence agencies and an untold number of private intelligence contractors, such as Stratfor, whose ignoble mission of trading secret information to governments and corporations was revealed in another recent leak by the hacker Jeremy Hammond). It was Ben Franklin who said that "they who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety." Never has this aphorism been so apt. The most recent revelations of the Snowden case show us just how pervasive and perverse the NSA has become (or maybe it was always this way, but with less amenable technology and/or publicity). What we are dealing with is the interception, collection, and monitoring of personal email, internet searches, phone conversations, and more, all over the world and on American citizens in their own houses. The NSA, we have learned, has virtually unchecked power and resources with no limitations or oversight. It is unclear who is being made more secure from whom.

In conclusion, we must remember that the things in this article are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg in the larger issue of Free Speech versus state secrecy and security. Indeed, the First Amendment has needed protection from government infringement since before the ink was even dry on the Bill of Rights. It will continue to be so in the future. A democracy (or what passes for one) will always depend on the active involvement of citizens to defend their own rights against the class of the Power Elite who would happily curtail those rights for their personal and financial gain. A government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" will be so in fact, as well as in name, only as long as its citizens force their elected leaders to work for them. A corollary to this is that citizens can only be involved in

decision-making and accountability if they are in possession of relevant information on what exactly their government has been doing in their name (and with their tax money). This is why we should honor transparency rather than secrecy, and give courageous whistleblowers medals rather than prison sentences. We should not acquiesce in the expansion of the surveillance state and the cult of secrecy, giving up freedoms in the name of security. Such a systemic evil can lead only to an Orwellian future which must be avoided at any cost.

Dr. King's Final Dream

We recently witnessed the 50th anniversary celebration of the famous 1963 "March on Washington", which was a peaceful gathering in the nation's capital to advocate for Civil Rights for African-Americans. The original event climaxed with the magnificent speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called the "I Have a Dream" speech, and rightly considered the most important piece of modern American oratory. What went unmentioned at this recent celebration was the same thing that has generally been lost to history: the fact that Dr. King's vision went beyond just civil rights. The official name of the event was "The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." Dr. King knew that civil rights and voting protections were essentially hollow achievements if they were not accompanied by the arguably more important economic rights that would provide more jobs and opportunity for poor Americans (no matter Black or White). The March is generally considered to be one of the important catalysts that led to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act – two highly important and symbolic new laws that were nonetheless mildly enforced. On the occasion of this semi-centennial

anniversary, let’s take the time to assess the legacy of the March as well as Dr. King’s more profound and controversial vision for America.

The March on Washington and the subsequent passage of the two above-mentioned laws were the impetus for a massive change in the American political landscape that still has very real ramifications. When the former slave states of the South saw that the Federal government was no longer going to implicitly support their violent segregation and terrorism of their large Black population, the White leaders of the South led an exodus away from the Democratic party (which had passed the civil rights laws) to the Republican party (which had been the party of Lincoln and Emancipation 100 years earlier). The rampart white supremacism that united the “Solid South” thus led to cynical politicians like Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan exploiting the new “Southern Strategy”, a gambit designed to actively alienate Blacks and minorities in order to gain full access to the electoral block of the southern states. It was a hugely successful strategy that allowed the Republicans to win all but three presidential elections from 1968-2008. The election and re-election of Barack Obama, as well as demographic change, seems to have finally rendered ineffectual the 40-year dominance of the cynical Southern Strategy.

On another front, the Supreme Court decided in June of this year to effectively erase one of the most important provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act: a clause which provided Federal oversight and protection of voting rights in nine mostly Southern states with the most egregious history of racial discrimination and disenfranchisement. The Supreme Court voted 5-4 in favor of dismantling part of the law, with the five conservative judges who were appointed by Republican presidents united on the matter. Their rationale was that the Voting Rights Act had worked so well to protect voting rights from discrimination and to allow minorities to vote that it was actually not needed any longer. That is like saying that

because the Fourteenth Amendment has worked so well to stop slavery it is no longer needed on account of there being no slaves at the moment. This foolish decision obviously does not take into account the fact that many states have moved from the "first generation" techniques of disenfranchisement, such as literacy tests and outright intimidation (or even physical violence in the worst cases) to stop Blacks from going to the ballot box, to more modern and subtle techniques of racial gerrymandering, voter ID laws, and restricting voting times and access. An example of the extreme gerrymandering that has made of mockery of the democratic process are the states of Pennsylvania and Ohio: both states voted for Obama by solid percentages of 5% and 3%, respectively, yet in Pennsylvania Republicans won 13 of 18 seats in the House of Representatives, and in Ohio it was 12 of 15 for Republicans. Similarly, when the Supreme Court made its recent decision to re-allow discrimination, Republican-led states such as Texas and North Carolina literally could not wait a single day to reinstate the types of voting restrictions that we wished had already vanished from public acceptability. Finally, on the anniversary of the March there was not a single Republican who attended the event, neither to give a speech nor to even support the idea that equality is something to be supported by that party. This is despite the fact that event organizers and the King family had strongly wanted and tried to get leaders from both parties to make it a non-partisan affair, and despite the fact that all elected Congressmen were invited to attend. This reflects extremely poorly on the Republican party, which has yet to abandon the success of its 40-year Southern strategy and cannot accept that its time has come and gone. It also reveals that in the 50 years since the March on Washington we still have much work to do to protect freedom against intolerance, and that for every step forward that we make we also have to guard against those who want to take us a step (or more) backwards.

Dr. King himself continued the fight for five years after the

March until he was assassinated in April 1968 at the age of 39. A poor white man with an old rifle was convicted for the murder and spent his life in prison, but the findings have always been highly suspect and it is certain that much more powerful forces were at work to silence Dr. King. The reason is that Dr. King was a controversial figure who, despite the peaceful and positive March on Washington, was actually increasingly active against the general economic and political status quo. In the five years between the March and his assassination, the focus of his work and his rhetoric evolved from fighting for civil rights to fighting against the entire system that produced war and poverty at home and abroad. Specifically, he began to express doubt about the efficacy of the Vietnam War. Some of the first opposition to the Vietnam War came out of the civil rights movement, maybe because it was easier for Blacks to distrust the government claims that it was fighting for freedom. A gathering in 1964 in Mississippi held at the same time of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution compared the use of force against Vietnam to the violence Blacks faced everyday at home in Mississippi. In 1967 (a year before he was killed) Dr. King gave a speech in New York called “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.” In this speech, he spoke forcefully against the American war in Indochina, saying that the goal of the US was “to occupy it as an American colony.” He also said that the US government was “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.” This vocal stance put him in opposition to President Johnson, who had earlier signed both of the new laws protecting civil and voting rights. He continued to speak out against the unlawful military action in Vietnam, and in January 1968 he called for another march on Washington against “one of history’s most cruel and senseless wars.”

Directly connected with his anti-war and anti-Vietnam views, Dr. King began to advocate for anti-poverty programs and social welfare at home. “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs

of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." For decades after World War Two, the US was by far the wealthiest and strongest country in the world, and spent a large majority of its budget on military spending and only a fraction on social welfare. Today the US is still easily the wealthiest and strongest country in the world and spends more on military than the next 10 countries combined, and yet poverty and income inequality have both increased, rather than decreased, over time. Dr. King's vision reached to the heart of the matter and saw that the American government spends vast amounts of money to establish and maintain a global empire and a military state, but basically disregards the huge numbers of its own citizens who were poor and without hope.

In 1968, Dr. King started the Poor People's Campaign to fight for economic justice in general, aimed at helping not only Blacks but all disadvantaged people. He saw that poor white people were in the same boat as poor black people, but that both were wedged apart from fighting together for their economic rights because of the man-made issue of racism. He condemned a system that spent lavishly on making war against poor countries across the globe while ignoring its poor people at home and refusing to guarantee them a living wage. His new message was intentionally more revolutionary than his earlier calls for equal rights. He lost support from many politicians, unions, white allies, the press, and even some of his fellow civil rights leaders. This did not stop him from continuing his new mission to fight against the ingrained injustice of a system that rewards greed but ignores the helpless. The FBI under J. Edgar Hoover had long monitored Dr. King for subversive activity, and from 1963 until his death he was the target of an intensive campaign of investigation and intimidation intended to discredit him. Wire-tapping was authorized by Attorney General Robert Kennedy in 1963, and the FBI harassed him constantly, culminating in a letter threatening to reveal allegations of extramarital affairs unless he committed suicide. Dr. King dismissed the forces

stacked against him and continued to fight for justice until he became too dangerous to the powers that be, and he was silenced.

The tragedy of all wars is not only the horror and death that is brought mostly upon weak and innocent civilians, but the fact that the soldiers fighting the wars often come from the same disadvantaged backgrounds and have no mutual enmity with each other but are manipulated all the same by the class of war profiteers, crony capitalists, and power-mongers. This is the case with the Vietnam war, protested by Dr. King and by millions of other Americans; in that war the world's most advanced military spread destruction, murder, and mayhem against a poor peasant population on the other side of the world that wanted the freedom to live their own lives in peace. Dr. King fought against the injustice of a government that could profess to defend freedom overseas while supporting oppression at home. Today, I think we know what he would be fighting for if he saw that we were still preaching the same freedom while hypocritically attacking and bombing other countries, supporting coups d'etats and violent dictators, creating a massive intelligence infrastructure that indiscriminately spies on citizens at home and abroad, sending unmanned "drones" to fire missiles at military-age males in other countries without due process or legal justification, and building a vast network of private prisons across the country to make incarceration a profit-making business that preys on the poor and minorities, all while saying that there is not enough money to support education, health care, social programs, homeless people (who are often veterans), to raise the minimum wage, or to enact Dr. King's solution of instituting a living wage. The truth that Dr. King knew was that there is a deep connection between the evils of racism, poverty, materialism, and militarism; for him, the only solution was "a radical restructuring of society" that would go beyond giving lip service to high ideals in order to actually defend justice and fairness and human dignity.

The achievements that came from the Civil Rights movement were due not only to strong leadership, but to the idea of sustained solidarity. This is to be the only solution if we are to continue to fight for progress and a more just society. The March on Washington came about by the unified efforts of six independent civil rights organizations, as well as a wide coalition of students, unions, churches, and white Americans that sympathized with the cause. Differences were put aside so that real progress could be made. Only strength in numbers is able to create the pressure needed to force change from unwilling politicians, who otherwise benefit from stasis. More importantly, we must see each other as one human family rather than a group of various classifications, and to ignore those who profit who the division of the weak and the strong. Only by standing together in great numbers with common cause against the power elite can we change an unfair system and try to bend the arc of history towards justice. As Dr. King showed, this means going beyond mere words or beliefs and becoming socially and politically active, not standing by when we see injustice in our communities or our country at large, and joining groups of like-minded activists who are also willing to make a difference. Dr. King made a real difference in fighting for justice and paid the ultimate price for his principles; the way to honor his legacy and his dream is to get involved and not stand on the sidelines. The only way to guarantee freedom and justice is to ensure that they are extended to everyone, rich and poor, home and abroad.

On Racism and Other Bigotries

Racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, tribalism, nationalism, parochialism, xenophobia, jingoism, bigotry, intolerance, hatred. These are the topics to be discussed

presently. I was inspired to write this after reading a short essay by Sartre called “Portrait of an Antisemite,” and realizing that all forms of bigotry are connected and share the same pathologies and deficiencies. Firstly, the bigot appeals to emotional and passionate arguments rather than reason. The bigot is happy to confound rational interlocutors by means of either worn-out cliche, invented evidence in his favor, or, in the last case, hysterics. The bigot prefers intimidation and bullying, and uses these tools to bring his opponent down to his level. He does not accept the authority of logical consistency, and if he uses any form of logical argument at all, it is an obviously flawed one that he hopes will go unchallenged. Therefore, the bigot is typically (but not always) anti-intellectual. He reacts to challenges by resorting to hysterical or violent rhetoric, or, in the best case, merely dismissing the challenger as “one of them”.

Secondly, the bigot lives in a world that is constantly defined by “us versus them” and other types of Manichean struggle. His world must be a simple one in which he is on the side of “Good,” and there is always something else which threatens his own well-being, which is “Evil” or “the Other.” His world is defined negatively, by what he is not or what he is against, rather than positively, what he is for. Therefore, the bigot is often (but not always) politically conservative, and when changes happen in the world he tends to become a reactionary.

Thirdly, the bigot only exists in a specific social context. He is never alone in his beliefs. His attitude itself is always the product of social indoctrination, and often validates the bigot’s special sense of belonging in his community. Sartre writes: “Antisemitism is distinguished, like all the manifestations of an irrational collective soul tending to create a conservative and esoteric France. It seems to all these feather-brains that by repeating at will that the Jew injures the country, they are performing one of those

initiation rites which allows them to feel themselves a part of the centers of warmth and social energy; in this sense anti-Semitism has retained something of the human sacrifice."

The impulse to bigotry almost certainly stems from a vestige of the human tribal instinct which has survived in the development of our species. Everyone who was not a member of our immediate family or tribe was potentially, and most likely, an enemy to be avoided or killed. We are no longer in need of this ancient urge, however, and its survival attests to the strength of the instinct. The more prominent place in our modern lives of reason, science, and historical knowledge also dictates that there is no excuse for those intolerant masses of people who cling to beliefs that have long outlived any usefulness they might have once had in pre-history.

Of all the types of bigotry, anti-Semitism is one of the oldest in existence and most infamous. Its history can be dated specifically to the first two centuries of Christianity, and its roots derive completely from religious intolerance, though it has acquired over the centuries a racial aspect due to the fact that Jews did not often mingle with Gentiles and thus kept their Semitic physical features. [Note on the word "Semitic": it derives from a root word that originally only described a broad group of languages that were based around Mesopotamia and the Arabia peninsula. Though "Semitic" is commonly used to refer only to Jews, or speakers of Hebrew, it could properly be used for anyone who speaks Arabic, Aramaic, Maltese, or diverse ancient languages such as Phoenician and Akkadian.]

The Gospels of the New Testament became gradually more anti-Jewish as they were written. Mark, the first to be written around roughly 65 CE (over 30 years after the crucifixion), took no especial notice of the role of the High Priests of the Temple, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or any other Jewish agents as complicit in the death of Jesus (except Judas, of course); it was a Roman-led affair. By the time we get to

John, written around 100 CE, the local bands of new Christians had begun to spread, and to win ever more converts among the Gentiles as well. The new religion needed to separate itself as a faith from its monotheistic progenitor, and placing blame on the Jews for the death of Jesus was an easy solution. After John, we see the earliest of the Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr and Tertullian, place emphasis on the guilt of the Jewish people as a whole for their crime of deicide. Ironically, Tertullian, who was an anti-Semite and celebrated the eternal hellfire awaiting all non-Christians, also wrote tracts arguing for religious freedom for Christians, who were being persecuted sporadically around the empire. From there, it is a long 2000-year history of intolerance towards Jews in European societies leading ultimately to the Holocaust.

Racism is the belief that a difference in the amount of the pigment melanin in his skin makes a person of particular hue incomparably superior to those with a slightly higher or lower amount of the pigment. Europeans and their descendants, having first achieved dominance over the rest of the world due (mostly) to fortunate geography that led to the strategic and ruthless deployment of guns, germs, and steel (Jared Diamond has written a book by this title that explains convincingly the long series of causes and effects that led to Europeans dominating the world through colonial expansion and empire—I previously reviewed the book here), are the biggest abusers of the bogus "racial superiority theory" which roughly states that some "races" (namely, Europeans) are superior to others (the rest of the world, and especially other humans with darker skin) because they (Europeans) have stronger militaries. Never mind the fact that these militaries were developed over the centuries through a vicious cycle of escalating warfare amongst themselves, to which all other indigenous peoples would have rightly been unprepared and shocked upon finding themselves on the receiving end of European barbarity during the Age of Discovery. Because of this rather arbitrary course of history, we most often witness

humans with white-ish skin tone being racist against other humans with darker skin tones. I must emphasize that the mental disease of racism can be found in all societies, but that it is especially common and despicable when used by those wielding power (Europeans and their descendants for the last 500 years) against those who are relatively powerless (Third World countries, and the poor and minorities in all countries).

Italy, the country in which I live, recently elected a new government; one of the appointed ministers of the majority Democratic party is Cecile Kyenga, a woman of African origins, having immigrated to Italy at a young age from Congo. She received an education in Italy, lived her life in Italy, and is obviously Italian for all practical purposes; she now serves as the Minister of Immigration, a post which would seem to fit her skills quite well. If you ask a racist, however, the only pertinent issue is her inferiority and otherness due to the higher level of melanin in her skin. Members of the Italian Parliament from the far-right Northern League party felt that it was appropriate, during a recent speech of the Immigration Minister, to throw bananas at her and yell "Go back to Africa!". Another senior member of Parliament from the Northern League party publicly and shamelessly called Kyenga an orangutan. These were elected members of Parliament, and racists, who were elected by other racists to support their bigoted beliefs and to try to stop the immigration of people with more pigmented skin.

Closer to home for me is the case of Barack Obama. The election and re-election of America's first black president (half-black, but no one seems to care about that distinction) would have naturally made us assume that racism was waning. In some ways it was true (we elected a "black" president!) but in other ways it revealed exactly to what extent racism is alive and well. The election of Obama seems to have deeply offended racist bigots around America (I cannot imagine why). For years

they had quietly been forced underground and could not openly express their racist beliefs in mixed company, but they always knew they were right since people like them – people with white-ish colored skin – were in charge of things. They muttered about the injustice of affirmative action, and howled whenever a darker skinned person was accepted for a job or in a university when there was at least one person with lighter skin who was rejected. They knew that there was something inherently superior about their relative lack of melanin. So you can imagine the shock when Obama was elected.

Obama represents, for the racist, the Great Other—a person who is so far removed from the familiar and correct world that the racist inhabits that he might as well be an alien. Never mind that he is just a moderate, centrist Democrat with a great family and biography who is almost totally inoffensive as a person. Never mind the fact that the people who oppose him as if he were the second coming of Vladimir Lenin in America are basically opposing a guy who would have been a moderate Republican a couple decades ago. I have visited America three times since Obama was elected, and one of those times I visited the dentist. This dentist was previously unknown to me, and I went to him on the recommendation of my family due to his low prices. He and his two assistants were very friendly and loquacious elderly people with deep Southern drawls (one might even say Southern charm). When it came time for the final inspection of my teeth, the dentist, while I was unable to talk or reply due to the metal tool jammed in my mouth, proceeded to tell me in confidence that Obama was secretly a Muslim, and that of this fact he (the dentist) had never been so sure of anything in all his life. Charming.

Though they are rarely empowered to openly state their racism (progress!), the bigot can easily transfer the reasons for his distrust of Obama from one thing to another. He will not say, in company, that the amount of pigment in the president’s skin makes him evil, but that is what they mean when they accuse

him of being un-American, socialist, fascist, Marxist, Kenyan, and talk about “taking their country back”. Back from whom? Since white people exploited black people for slave labor in the building of America, after completing the genocide of the original darker skinned native people, to the racist this is the proper relationship for all time. In America, the strongest form of racism appears as white supremacy, which was used to control the huge African slave population of the South for centuries, as well as to ensure that the lower classes of poor and disenfranchised whites never sided with the slaves against the rich upper classes.

One final note about racism and politics in America: the Southern strategy. This was a cynical strategy formulated by Republican party operatives in the time of Richard Nixon to exploit and wield the racism of the South to create a wedge between white voters and black voters, and to ultimately win elections. The strategy was used quite effectively by Ronald Reagan, who mocked black recipients of welfare aid and casually let the white racist voter know that he will not allow black people to take advantage of the system to get ahead any longer. The Republican party continues to use the strategy today, kicking and screaming and becoming less and less coherent in their indiscriminate use of intolerance for political gain. The two elections of Obama, and the changing demographics of America, has basically doomed to failure the Southern strategy (though not racism itself). Another strategy will doubtless be formulated to pit people of different skin tones against each other, and distract them from those who truly exploit them.

Sexism, on the other hand, is the belief that a human animal of one sex is inherently, or innately, superior to one of the other sex. While there are surely some scattered examples of women who hate or look down on men as inferior, it is obvious to all that the real issue is male chauvinism, or misogyny (from the Greek “hater of women”). This is the belief that

humans of the male persuasion, who are genetically predisposed to produce more of the hormone testosterone and so become physical larger and stronger, are therefore superior, more intelligent, and more fit for power than women. You see, to the sexist bigot, bigger size means both bigger intelligence and bigger right to rule the human world. It is hard to say which is more prevalent between racism and sexism, but sexism is probably more tolerated and more bound up in the structure of all except the most progressive societies. This has been the story ever since the rise of modern human civilizations around 10,000 years ago, when agriculture led to new cities, new kings, and new war gods (who overthrew the old mother goddesses). Is there any reason a women should not get paid the same amount of money as a man for doing the exact same job for the exact same amount of time? Rationally speaking, no. But to the chauvinist a woman can never be as good as a man in anything (except raising children, of course), and so she should not deserve equal pay or equal rights.

Back to Italy, my country of residence, we can see some of the worst examples of structural misogyny in the developed world, as well as some reasons to have hope for improvement. The man who has led Italy for the largest part of the last two decades, Silvio Berlusconi, is both the richest man in Italy and the owner of a media empire. He surely has one of the most openly disrespectful attitudes towards women of any “leader” in the developed nations. He appointed female porn stars to cabinet positions, and has very effectively employed Italy’s long-standing culture of chauvinism and machismo for his own purposes. Though he still controls the country’s right-wing party, he was finally convicted in one of the dozen lawsuits against him (this one not for underage prostitution but for tax fraud) and will not serve again as prime minister. On the flip side, a recent election has just made the new Italian parliament the youngest ever (average age 47) and the highest female representation ever (31% – for comparison, after the recent US elections Congress now has its own highest female

representation ever at "only" 18%). This part is too easy: elect more women, and things will improve!

It is no secret that religions have played a huge part in maintaining and justifying institutional sexism. We shudder to imagine the sad lot of most women born into most majority-Muslim countries. Not being able to drive, not being able to leave the house without a male relative, and husbands being legally protected against beating and raping their wives are three common features. It is difficult to even imagine a road towards political empowerment at this point, but we can hope for an quick improvement in basic education and human rights at the very least. Christianity has also celebrated the submission of wives to their husbands, and the second-class status of women in general. Thus, many Christian women have accepted their lot with resignation for millenia because it was written in the Good Book. Fortunately, the Enlightenment and the advent of secular politics in the Christian countries has led to the gradual enfranchisement and empowerment of women. We can already imagine the potential sexist resurgence that will accompany the first female American president (much like the resurgent racism after Obama), but let us hope in any case for more women in positions of power.

Changing to another form of bigotry, homophobia is when a person hates human beings who love other human beings who happen to share the same genitalia. The homophobe is filled with fear, hate, and typically suppressed homosexuality. Religions, once again, have told people that homosexuality demands a death sentence, and there are probably not a small number of homophobes who would like to enforce such a legal code (and still do today in certain Third World countries such as Uganda and Russia). In Leviticus, there is a long list of verses specifically outlawing sex with mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, sisters and brothers in law, mothers and fathers in law, sons and daughters in law, mothers and daughters or granddaughters at the same time, women having

their period, and animals, in addition to those proscribing men lying with other men (the preceding verse also warns against child sacrifice); those other things tend to get ignored and forgotten. That would require too much logical consistency for the bigot. Even so, I do not recall any of the words of Jesus condemning homosexuals – he hung out with 12 unmarried dudes! –, or for that matter women (he hung out with prostitutes!), dark-skinned people (he was a dark-skinned person!), or Jews (he was a Jew!). He did say, however, that all of the laws of the Old Testament were valid, so we should assume that he was anti-incest, anti-child sacrifice, and anti-gay. Homosexuality is a trait that can be found in at least 1000 other animal species, including all the primates (such as chimpanzees, monkeys, and humans), many other mammals, birds, and even fish. It is a product of evolution, just like higher or lower amounts of melanin or testosterone. And despite the bigoted homophobe, love always trumps hate.

Finally, let's talk about nationalism. This is the peculiar belief that the particular section of the earth's crust on which you are born is superior to every other piece of earth, and thus it demands your lifelong loyalty. This idea is appealing to large numbers of ignorant and easily manipulated humans who, as we have seen, often need little excuse for emotional prejudice against anyone other than those who look like them or were born in close proximity to their section of earth. This idea has had great utility for governments since the advent of the modern nation states in state-sanctioned homicide and theft against people born on more distant pieces of earth. Never mind the fact that national borders are highly artificial and arbitrary, and are often the result of accidents of history if not intentional theft. Also never mind the fact that the place where you are born is completely random and outside of your control, and that the only thing we can ever control is our own actions. Those would be facts based on reason and reflection, which are things not to be found in the bigot's arsenal.

It is no wonder that nationalism has been expertly and cynically whipped up by political leaders since the beginning of civilization, but especially since the rise of the modern industrial nation states in the last few centuries. At the outbreak of World War One, Germany and England enthusiastically asserted their mutual superiority and hatred towards each other, despite each being the biggest trading partner with the other prior to the war, and despite being the most developed scientific nations in the world. Dr. Samuel Johnson famously said: “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.” While we cannot be sure exactly what he meant, we can guess that it has something to do with the ease with which a malicious intent can be excused by an appeal to Patriotism. Presumably, love of one’s country, but not love of anyone else. It is not common in which we find even the most ardent patriot who evinces love even towards all the people of his country.

So now, what do we do about racism and other forms of bigotry? First, we always keep in mind that there are no different races, but only one human race. Race is a social, rather than a biological construct. Biologically, the genetic diversity between the human species is a tiny fraction of a percent of our genetic code, and the genes that determine pigmentation are even still a smaller fraction of that fraction. According to the United Nations, there is no distinction between the terms *racial discrimination* and *ethnic discrimination,* and superiority based on racial differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and that there is no justification for racial discrimination, in theory or in practice, anywhere. Similarly, there is no human nature, but only human behavior. We are all free to make our own choices in how to act, but there is no excuse for acting badly towards others.

Next, we need to keep in mind that there is no paradox of tolerance, and tolerance of intolerance is, in fact,

intolerance. If we create a system based on rules and reasons, and someone acts outside of those rules and reasons, then that person is outside the system. Our society is what we make it, and to protect tolerance we must not support intolerance. Every act of intolerance or bigotry is, however minor it may seem, ultimately an emotional injunction to hatred and violence. As Sartre writes: “Antisemitism is not in the category of thoughts protected by the right to freedom of opinion.” This could be applied to the other forms of bigotry as well. He writes later: “The Jew is only a pretext: elsewhere it will be the Negro, the yellow race; the Jew’s existence simply allows the antisemite to nip his anxieties in the bud by persuading himself that his place has always been cut out in the world, that it was waiting for him and that by virtue of tradition he has the right to occupy it. Antisemitism, in a word, is fear of man’s fate. The antisemite is the man who wants to be pitiless stone, furious torrent, devastating lightning: in short, everything but a man.”

Equally, the bigot is someone who falls short of reaching full humanity by excluding other humans. What is needed is a sense of solidarity, for our shared planet, our shared lives, and our shared fate. What we need is a love of humanity as a whole. That is the only way to live, and the only way to live together.

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

A Veteran Relooks at War

We have collectively learned much in the last couple years about a secret and frightful new war machine – Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, aka drones. That is a topic for another day, however. The new awareness has generally increased since 2011, a year which witnessed the unexpected assassination of America's greatest terrorist nemesis, as well as the official conclusion of the American military presence in Iraq. Afghanistan has long been regarded by public opinion as the 'good' or 'necessary' war, while Iraq is mostly called (quite rightly) a war of 'choice' or even 'American adventurism', etc. Osama bin Laden and his rogue al-Qaeda network were based out of Afghanistan (after relocating from other less-than-desirable places such as Somalia and Sudan), which provided

the rationale for a bombing campaign (what is there to bomb there, anyway?) followed by a seemingly interminable occupation of that unfortunate country. Here are the agreeable official euphemisms for these actions (which are without a doubt not “wars”, since war has not been declared by Congress per the Constitution; in fact, the last “War” that America officially declared was World War II): “Operation Iraqi Freedom”, which lasted from 2003-2011 (a *mere* 9 years), and “Operation Enduring Freedom”, which began in late 2001 and will apparently continue until *at least* 2014. This last one, ‘OEF’, is already America’s longest war at 12 years and counting. Any sense of “progress” cannot be measured except by often-misleading statistics, and, as usual, civilians have suffered the most (while, as usual, arms producers have benefitted the most). It did not have to be like this.

During my career as a US Army Officer, I spent two years in Afghanistan (between 2005-2008) as a part of ‘OEF VI’ and ‘OEF VIII’ (the Roman numerals signifying the change of command from one Army unit to another). On my second tour, I discovered and read a book by Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani called *Letters Against the War*. It is no understatement to say that it began to open my eyes to the nature of the conflict I was personally (and quite voluntarily) involved in, since it had, at that time, long been a taboo subject to criticize the war in Afghanistan (once again, the ‘good’ war). In fact, it was not until roughly 2008, after years of political mismanagement (by the Bush administration as well as Congress) and neglect (by the media and populace at large), that public attention began to change and people began to question why we are still sending money and soldiers to kill and be killed in Afghanistan. Terzani wrote his letters in the months immediately after September 11, 2001, and he died less than 3 years later in 2004 at the age of 65. I find that even now, 12 years after their first publication during those heated months which followed *9/11*, they still remain relevant and are well worth reading by

anyone with even a passing interest in world affairs. They are short, and here you can read a free English online edition.

Terzani was never well-known in Italy until his last years. He left Italy to study Chinese in America, and for the rest of his career worked as a journalist for the German magazine *Der Spiegel* and traveled around every part of Asia. He was often a war correspondent and reported on virtually every conflict in Asia from the 1970's until post- 9/11. He witnessed both the fall of Saigon to the Vietcong, and the fall of Phnom Pehn to the Khmer Rouge. Obviously, he was no stranger to bloodshed. That is exactly why he was a pacifist who spoke strongly against war.

This is the context that underlies his *Letters Against the War*. Rather than being swept up by the raw emotion (and a generous amount of bloodlust) of 9/11 like most of the West (including and especially the media), and passively accepting blanket Manichean dichotomies such as "with us or against us", he appealed to reason and understanding. He argued that the solution to violence is not to create more violence. Especially when much of that violence comes in the form of bombs dropped from nearly invisible airplanes onto largely civilian populations who have no idea what the Twin Towers were or what happened there. The letters were originally published in the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* as Terzani's rebuttal of a violent anti-Muslim invective by fellow journalist and Florentine Oriana Fallaci. Terzani traveled through Pakistan and into Afghanistan in the weeks after 9/11, and reports firsthand the mood of the people there and the situation on the ground. He demonstrates his encyclopedic knowledge of Asian history and politics to explain how things work in a society that is so different from our own, and how we can trace the historical evolution behind radical Islam. While I may not agree with every opinion in the book, it is written with wisdom and circumspection, and I would recommend everyone read it.

At the very least, the point of reading and pondering such opinions is an important step for every citizen in a free society for any political action, but especially in the case of imminent war. We vote only for politicians, but cannot vote for each policy they enact after elected, and certainly not for wars or bombings or secret defense expenditures. Politicians will use every tool at their disposal to start a war if that is in their interest, regardless of the cost to the country, and the world, as a whole, not to mention human life. Methods to manipulate the public discourse are used as much as possible, with propaganda and misinformation the sharpest tools, in order to justify decisions that the electorate might not otherwise support (and cannot directly vote on). Would people still unquestioningly advocate the path towards war in the days after 9/11 if they knew the full costs that would be borne many years later? How many lives of Afghans and Iraqis and Americans (and other global citizens) is it worth to "avenge" the nearly 3000 mostly American lives lost on 9/11 (the true number will never be known, but must surely be at least two orders of magnitude higher)? How much money are we willing to spend on over a decade of war-making (an unthinkable percentage of which is for defense contractors, corrupt officials, or is still "unaccounted for"), when there are plenty of people in our own country and around the world who need food, medical care, and a fair chance to get an education? I think there are occasions in which war is either necessary or inevitable, but this is not very often, and should always be debated beforehand and entered into with caution and great reluctance (and not with emotion or bloodlust – the cheers following the death of Osama bin Laden attest to the latter). According to Steven Pinker's recent book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, conflict and violence are gradually decreasing in the human species. I think and hope that this is generally correct, and gives us extra reason to question the need and circumstances of any new potential war. Iran and Syria are the latest examples. We should always be, by default, in the opposition to any

political scheme that attempts to entangle us in wars, which are by nature destructive and unpredictable. Terzani made the case for peace (and still does so through his writings), and I think with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that he was one of the few voices of reason.

TED talk of Alberto Cairo, an Italian doctor who has helped war wounded in Afghanistan since 1990 and who Terzani met and wrote about in Letters Against the War

On a lighter related note, my favorite book by Terzani is probably his most popular, *A Fortune-Teller Told Me* (*Un indovino mi disse*). This 1995 book tells about how in 1976 in Hong Kong, a Chinese fortune-teller told Terzani that he would face mortal danger in 1993 and should not use airplanes in that year. Terzani didn't pay much attention (as none of us would for a prediction 17 years in the future), but at the end of 1992 he remembered it once again and, either out of fear or as a game, he decided to travel around Asia that year only by ground (or sea) transportation. Over the course of trains, boats, donkeys, and other means, he makes his way around Laos, Thailand, Burma, China, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Mongolia, Russia, and India recounting local history and legends, and testing each type of fortune-teller everywhere he goes. He is not a believer in superstition, and discusses in detail the many types of tricks of the trade of various astrologers, palm readers, etc, all of which are apparently quite popular in Asia. Most of all, he writes convincingly of the benefits of slow travel by ground, and how much deeper one feels a place with this method as opposed to hurried hops from one sterile airport to another. I have not succeeded in totally making all of my travels so ideally slow and plane-free, but I have tried it on occasion when I can (such as a bus trip from Wales to Italy in one case), and it is a richer experience (not to mention avoiding the annoyances of the post-9/11 airport security). Terzani is an expert in all matters of Asia, and this book is worth reading for his

anecdotes and unique perspective alone.

I recently had occasion to visit a place called Orsigna in the beautiful hills of northern Tuscany which was the setting for a film. The film was a German production based on the memoirs and final book of Terzani, *La fine è il mio inizio* (*The End is My Beginning*) (co-written and published posthumously by his son, Folco, in 2006). Terzani was born in Orsigna, and returned there from meditation in his Himalayan mountain hut shortly before his death (his stomach cancer caused his health to deteriorate rapidly). It is a very nice book, and the setting of the film itself is inspiring.

Thanks for reading, welcome to the new website, and please leave comments at your pleasure.

To put a hopeful paraphrase on a quotation of George Santayana: “Only the *future* has seen the end of war.”

(please watch John Lennon’s video below for a look at the true face of war)