

Against NATO: The Other Side of the Argument

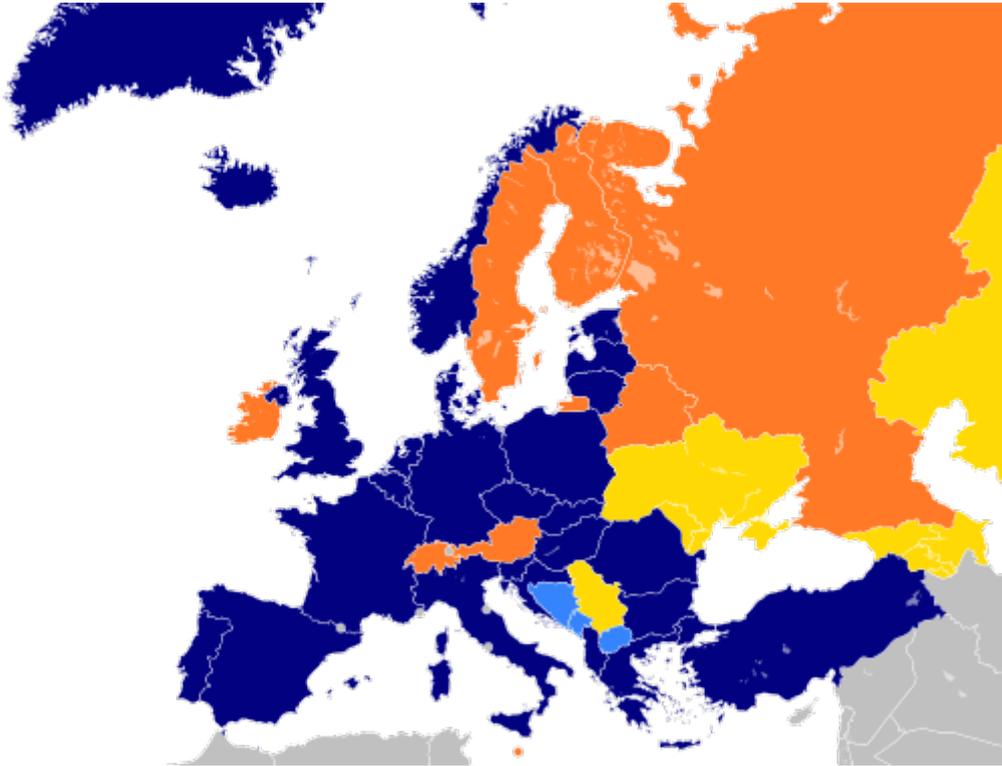
Since 1989-1991 when every country in the USSR or the Warsaw Pact (save Russia) jumped ship at the earliest opportunity, reasonable people have asked the question: why does the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) still exist? This essay represents an attempt to understand basic criticisms that exist across the Western and non-Western political spectrum—to take them at face value, and examine them in good faith. The author of this essay believes in the necessity of NATO—its goodness, in fact—so it is an attempt to see things from another perspective.

Speaking with people on the right and left who argue against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, one encounters two different critical methodologies that arrive at the same conclusion. This is how Americans who support former candidate for US President [Bernie Sanders](#) or current presidential candidate Dr. Jill Stein could find common ground with Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson, Republican candidate [Donald Trump](#) (and former Secretary of Defense, [Robert Gates](#)). It's also how Americans can find common ground with Russian nationalists, Chinese nationalists, and far-right groups across Europe.

Jumping into a comparison between the two groups' methodologies requires some minor simplification. I don't think this veers into oversimplification, but then, as I view both arguments against NATO as insufficient, that shouldn't be surprising. The motives of the left and the right are very different. As such, their criticisms have different moral

weight, and require different types of justification to make sense. The left and right are not "the same" for reaching similar conclusions about why one should not support a European Cold War alliance, but their conclusions do happen to agree. That's important.

Conservative NATO skeptics tend to bring two types of criticism against the organization. The first draws on skepticism over globalization and alliance, and is not unlike the "States Rights" argument one often encounters among this type of thinker. These people view NATO membership as a concession of US sovereignty and agency. Taking part in a mutual defense pact means the US having to defend *other countries* in ways that run contrary to its own interests. The US loses more than it gains from a military alliance with Europe. The second describes the problem in financial terms: the US cannot afford to spend the money it does on NATO, that money would be better spent almost anywhere else. This second source of concern is similar to the first in that it assumes that the US is somehow being cheated by participating in the alliance—out of sovereignty, agency, or money.



NATO as of this article's writing, from Wikipedia (NATO countries in blue)

NATO skeptics on the American left are less concerned about advancing “US” interests, and more interested in expanding a world where people can live free from war. To this type of thinking, the US is itself a source of much or the dominant piece of aggression in the world, and as NATO is subservient to US influence, it should be diminished. The hypothesis here is that a smaller or non-existent NATO would inevitably lead to a more peaceful world. People tend to live harmoniously with one another, much moreso than nations, and reducing any nation-state agency is to the good. This type of thinking also leads people to advocate for the reduction or outright destruction of all nuclear weapons. From this point of view—the humanist or humanitarian—the stronger and larger NATO is, the more likely war becomes.

Leftist criticism of NATO spending resembles conservative criticisms, with both claiming that the money spent on defense could go elsewhere. Whereas conservatives tend to prefer that

money spent on alliance flow instead to grow US military capability, liberals or progressives would prefer that money to be invested in education, infrastructure, and science, both domestically and overseas. This leftist tends to believe that lack of education or transportation leads to misunderstanding and violence, and that were everyone to have the same basis of understanding and knowledge, wars could be prevented.

Another possible anti-NATO stance comes from countries hostile to Europe. Countries that would prosper from NATO's wane (China, Russia, etc.), which correctly assess that a militarily unified Europe checks their own territorial or economic ambitions, are natural enemies of NATO. These countries view any alliance of which they are not a part as something to be diminished or destroyed. In a few cases, like that of Serbia, whose territorial ambition NATO buried in the 1990s, hostility could also represent lingering resentment toward having suffered military defeat. It is worth pointing out that people who refer to Serbia as "Yugoslavia" are, as a rule, almost always anti-NATO along these lines.

The final perspective hostile to NATO comes from within the US military establishment. This criticism tends toward the conservative: defense industry spending is a zero-sum game. A country only accumulates so much capital, and conservatives believe that investing in alliance or partnership wastes that capital. While the motivation in this case is financial, the criticism manifests itself as political: these skeptics focus on the [possibility of fighting war at the tactical level](#), independent of strategic considerations, or the diplomatic minutia of whether Russia was somehow [tricked or deceived by NATO's expansion](#). In all cases, the argument by people like Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R-48) ends up being reduced support for NATO. This amounts to tacit or explicit acceptance

of non-Western agendas.

Across the spectrum, people who have criticisms of NATO should not be viewed as necessarily hostile to American, European, or Western interests. While that is certainly the case in a few circumstances, for the most part, criticisms of NATO end up being reflections of the West's failure to translate its prosperity into a model that is sustainable in the rest of the world. As few places outside the US and Europe have experienced lasting prosperity under Western models, it's difficult for the West to dismiss criticisms out of hand.

In the US and in Europe, hostility toward NATO should be viewed as a failure on the part of NATO to communicate its purpose effectively. If NATO and the US were able to describe how and why, specifically, Europeans and North American participants benefit from the security arrangement, it seems unlikely that any morally and logically humanistic citizens of Western countries would see meaningful opposition to NATO, save on the absolute fringe. On the fringe left, people wish to weaken the US and Europe following the hypothesis that strengthening all non-European countries would lead to an increase in global justice. On the fringe right, people wish for there to be absolute US or European power, and see alliances between the two as contrary to the interests of each.

If you believe that peace and prosperity for all humans require a weaker Europe and USA, you see NATO as a problem. If, on the other hand, you believe the USA or Europe should be absolutely powerful, NATO appears wasteful at best, and a threat to your sovereignty at worst. I think you're wrong—but I understand your position.

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

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

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

There are two main characters in *Preparation for the Next*

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

The book abounds with stories and myths that the characters hear, and which they tell each other – they form the novel's life-blood, and are simultaneously vital to the plot and empty of all meaning. The myths that Zhou Lei's mother tells her, for example, serve as touchstones that readers can follow like signposts throughout the narrative. In one, offered in the beginning of the book, Zhou's mother explains that distant mountains conceal a land of plenty. Much later in the book, a tired, hungry, and distressed Zhou finds herself talking with an Uzbek Afghan grocer, who has seen the same mountains from his native country of Afghanistan. The Uzbek offers her food and water, and Zhou experiences momentary relief, which leads nowhere. In another of Zhou's mother's myths, a girl travels to the faraway land of plenty with nothing but seven seeds to sustain her. The girl burns her feet while traveling over an iron desert, but makes it through to a blue river, where she's healed. The occurrence of blue and injured feet later on in the book at various points offer useful guideposts on Zhou's actual journey – or, at least, gives readers a sense of how she views a given situation; in keeping with the book's relentless realism, these signifiers

are logical to the narrative and unto themselves, but don't actually deliver any more profound truth.

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

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

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

"Thank you, no."

"You sure? I just got out of the army yesterday. I literally just got here. All I want to do is buy you a drink to say thank you. Howbout it? I mean, you're not talkin' to a bad person."

"I realize that."

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

The physical descriptions of war arrive through Skinner's dreams, or shaded recollections, and tend toward the surreal. They feel authentic – the way one sees vivid experiences from the past, unmediated by the conscious mind – especially in the beginning of the deployment: *"They crossed paths with other units, soldiers who had been in heavy house-to-house fighting and there was a bad feeling, like they wanted to hurt somebody and you were it."* As time goes on in the war, readers experience combat like an especially urgent impressionistic painting in which Skinner has become trapped: *"In the arc-weld light, solid forms appeared to shift – the hanging dust.*

Shadows were running. The drilling deafening thundering never stopped. The razor lights leapt straight across the black, flashed past – he whipped his head around – and they went away and went arcing slowly down like baseballs. The ground and the air were being shocked.” He loses friends, and (at least at first) dreads his memories of those experiences – until later in the book, when, thoroughly in the grip of the delusion that war can provide some sort of balm for his aching soul, he dreams of the war as a happier place, a time of fellowship and shared purpose.

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

The relationship between Zhou Lei and Skinner is complicated, and depends in equal parts what each character represents to the other, which comes down to “escape.” Zhou seeks in Skinner a replacement for her father, a sergeant in the Chinese Army who died during one of the collectivization phases of Chinese development in the 70s. To support this dependence on the pro-military narrative in Zhou's life, references to her belief in and admiration for soldiers and the military abound. She claims to have “military training” and admires the trappings of Skinner’s service – his military gear, his camouflage, his boots. She does not, however, understand Skinner, and by the time his PTSD manifests and he begins acting as selfishly as he feels, she’s trapped with an emotionally abusive, self-destructive adolescent. To Skinner’s

credit, he often describes precisely what is important to him – his war, his pistol, his dream of one day returning to Iraq – rather than concealing his ambitions. Although he usually talks about the return to combat as a way to make money, it is quite clearly a dream to destroy himself, for a variety of reasons. Whether Zhou Lei willfully misunderstands Skinner, or it is simply a misunderstanding based on her desire for what he represents is left to the reader. For Skinner's part, he sees Zhou Lei as a sexual object most of the time, and, as time goes on and his condition worsens, alternately as a source of stability and a burden of which to be rid at any cost, until the book's unforgettable and dramatic conclusion.

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

described as “giant” when introduced to readers, then again on several occasions. While few would object to the medical assertion that a correlation exists between good health and good spirits (Mr. Carson of this blog argued the contrary [here](#)), *Preparation* actually bases part of its moral hierarchy on disciplined workout regimens, or “military training,” as Zhou Lei puts it, so much so that the final image in the book is that of a good character preparing to squat more weight than they have ever before attempted. A character’s fitness or health does not mean, necessarily, that they are good, or healthy, but the absence of fitness is a sure sign of spiritual poverty. In the context of the book’s ostensible theme, then, characters use working out as a replacement for the affection they don’t derive from external sources, or as a means of escape from a world over which they otherwise have no control. Working out, according to the logic of the text, is an activity that leads nowhere, and gives its participants nothing beyond temporary respite from a sense of existential terror that runs like rapids throughout the text.

Many people believe that love offers some sort of redemption – a way to balance out the sins of violence, the choices its nation made in war. When Skinner disagrees with Zhou’s proposition that love makes the world go round, she challenges him. “*What makes the world go round,*” she says, and Skinner answers: “*War... Actually, I’d say money first. Money and then war.*” America, a capitalist society that seems addicted to both money and war, has made serious mistakes in its pursuit of both – like torture, like bullying, like unnecessary violence, like sexual assault, like disastrously unregulated financial markets, all to no apparent end. And as much as readers would like a classic love story to make it all seem okay, that redemptive narrative isn’t here for American society in the way that it seemed accessible or deserved after World War II. In the end, after all the struggles, perhaps the best analogy for this book in the western canon would be one a disillusioned Hemingway wrote after The Great War – *A Farewell*

to Arms. The sad truth is, there is no transcendent understanding bought when one covets trauma and violence – only more trauma and more violence – a pessimistic, never ending cycle. *Preparation for the Next Life* delivers both, and in such a way that one cannot help but grow from reading it.

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Brad Pitt and the Myth of the Wehrmacht

Brad Pitt loves playing in WWII movies. He loves fighting Nazis, who, incredibly, really existed, and were (if anything) even more evil than comes across on a movie screen. For 12 years, one of the most civilized, technologically and institutionally advanced countries on earth was ruled by a brutal, vicious band of thugs who employed racial mythology, sentimentalism, romanticism, emotion, intimidation, and murder in their attempt to extort as much wealth as possible from the populations they ruled. While not the worst catastrophe the world has ever witnessed, to put the Nazis in list terms (the only terms most people understand these days), we're probably talking one of the three all-time worst. Almost certainly bottom five, and indisputably bottom ten.

It's important to frame the list in terms of utility, or effectiveness, so as not to unintentionally make the case that this type of behavior is worthy of praise, or anything other than the most resounding condemnation and rejection. Oftentimes people confuse the intensity or degree of an action with its having some sort of value as an accomplishment, which

is completely false. An evil accomplishment is not an accomplishment at all – only a fiend would claim different. Therefore, the Nazis and other misfortunes that humanity have inflicted upon itself such as other brands of totalitarianism or authoritarianism should never occupy the "top" of any list – only the bottom, where they belong.

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

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

Fury billed itself as a "realistic" movie, and a lot of the marketing surrounding the film concerned its attention to detail as well as the importance to the actors and studio that

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

SPOILER



There is a scene with a Tiger tank that arrives with about 30 minutes left to go in the movie. One understands immediately that in a movie named for a tank, the Tiger will likely not destroy Fury and then rumble away as the protagonist (played by Brad Pitt), a troubled staff sergeant named Wardaddy, leads his crew to safety. The question becomes whether the American close air support (featured shortly before the tanks roll out) will show up and knock out the Tiger, or whether somehow Fury and the other tanks will outmaneuver the Tiger and knock it out, or some other plausible scenario, for example maybe Brad Pitt knows how to make sticky bombs [like Tom Hanks](#). In a brilliant reference to the old GI Joe cartoons, where Cobras would unload battalions worth of firepower on the outgunned and outnumbered Joes, missing every time, the Tiger manages to destroy the other non-Fury tanks, then miss or score glancing hits (from point blank range with AP ammo) on Fury, until Wardaddy has maneuvered the tank behind the Tiger, and scores a direct hit seconds before the Tiger manages to miss again, or score another dramatic near-miss.

BACK TO NON-SPOILER

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

META SPOILER

Lest I be seen as a hater (someone who just criticizes success to make myself sound clever or fill some internal insecurity or bitterness), allow me to propose an alternative movie, which I found to be much closer to the truth about the horrors of war, (if less "realistic") – and which I proposed in my preview review of *Fury – Cross of Iron*. In [the end of Cross of Iron, a corrupt and ambitious Prussian Captain wants a Cross of Iron, and follows a heroic enlisted German soldier into a suicidal counterattack](#). This action occurs during a Russian assault in which the German unit is being overrun, and the action is remarkably even-handed – Russians and Germans are slaughtered indiscriminately, and heroic actions are presented as tiny tragedies. The protagonist and the Captain are fired upon – by a child – and the Captain can't figure out how to reload his submachine gun. The enlisted German soldier – Steiner, played brilliantly by James Coburn – sees this happen and begins laughing hysterically. The Russian child soldier is so disgusted by the Prussian's incompetence and desperation that he rolls his eyes rather than shooting again.

The Prussian officer pathetically puts his helmet on backwards, still without having reloaded his submachine gun while Steiner laughs at the tragic absurdity of it all. From there, the movie cuts to the ending credits a series of stills of an execution carried out by Nazis, Steiner's laughter ringing in our ears. The credits are, collectively, one of the most powerfully damning pieces of evidence against the Nazis I've seen in any movie, ever.

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

META SPOILER COMPLETE – INITIATE SPOILER

At the end of *Fury*, the tank is disabled by a German anti-tank mine, cleverly placed in a piece of key strategic terrain. As it happens, Wardaddy's crew has been tasked with defending this terrain against a possible German counterattack – they are the only protection remaining between the Germans and an American resupply column. It is an afternoon in April, 1945. One of the tank's crew mans an OP, and discovers, with horror, that a full Battalion of adult male (i.e. veteran) SS panzer grenadier infantry is approaching down the road, singing, marching, panzerfausts at the ready – full of esprit de corps and savage intention, the kind we know is bad because they're SS.

Let's suspend disbelief – I'm sure it's possible such an event like this happened, even near the end of the war. I read a memoir by an [SS infantry officer called *Black Edelweiss*](#) which should be required reading for every young American male, as a cautionary tale of how propaganda and blind nationalism can lead even the best-intentioned young men astray. The author (writing for understandable reasons under the guise of a

pseudonym) describes how his unit was shifted from the far north of Finland to Germany in January-February of 1945. Moving at night via ship, train, and foot to avoid being strafed or bombed, the unit was detected during an attack and strafed, bombed, and shelled nearly out of existence before seeing any enemy (American or British) soldiers. The survivors were then sent on a series of increasingly absurd missions, culminating, for the author, in a pointless and near-suicidal defense of a position with a single machine-gun against two Sherman tanks, which coincided with his injury and incarceration.

So this unit of SS infantrymen is moving in formation, singing, near the frontline, down a road, in a place where the Americans have aerial domination (uncontested access to the skies). It seems incredible – but maybe this is just a testament to confidence in their fighting prowess. The soldier at the OP runs back to tell Wardaddy about the situation – 300 enemy veteran soldiers, trucks, vehicles, kitted out to fight. Wardaddy's reaction is to announce that the others should return to the unit, but that he's carrying out the mission – he's manning Fury, staying with the tank, to repulse the Germans. The other American soldiers in the tank concur that this is a sound and reasonable plan, and they set about prepping for an ambush, in a scene that echoes the ending of *Saving Private Ryan*.

Now – the ambush and ensuing battle are relatively unimportant, and filled with the type of improbable and ludicrous cinematic excesses one would rightly expect it to contain. The crew guns down Germans as though they were pigeons; for their part, the Germans have inexplicably packed away the Panzerfausts they were carrying in cumbersome boxes. The SS has forgotten to fight, or perhaps never learned – something that would be slightly more believable if the unit were not filled with veteran adults, rather than cannon-fodder children. It's important, vital, even, to note here that every

serious military analyst has credited Germany's early battlefield successes and long survival against impossible odds to a marked tactical superiority over their Russian, British, and American foes – the myth that German military success derived from technological superiority is a convenient invention of video game producers, Hollywood, and daytime television hucksters. The truth of the matter is that, outgunned, outproduced, and outmatched in almost every important category, the Germans held on because they outfought their enemies tactically almost everywhere, finding themselves bested occasionally by elite American units in areas like Bastogne, or by Russians at Kursk. Much of WWII was, for the Allies, a function of merely holding on, shelling the Germans with artillery and bombing them while our inferior soldiers made incremental gains against exhausted and increasingly ill-trained conscripts. This is not embarrassing or shameful – we won a modern war against a country attempting to fight along pre-modern lines (using human ingenuity against weapons). On top of which, the Nazis were, as described before, a pack of evil and unscrupulous bullies who needed to be stopped. So – to come back to the original point – Fury inflicts massive losses on the Germans, who continue to rush the tank rather than flanking it, or doing anything even the most basic military unit knows to do. As a combat-proven, valorously decorated former airborne infantry officer who has seen combat firsthand, I can say this without a shadow of doubt: in reality, the ambush and combat go down very differently from how they are portrayed in the movie.

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

I've thought about why this must've been for some time, why none of it hung together. I mean, sure, anyone who has been to

combat and knows how the thing works must find a movie like *Fury* condescending and trite. But why did the director and actors decide to play the movie this way? Why undercut the basic premise that the Germans were a serious, formidable foe? My hypothesis is that Hollywood has been producing these movies for so long that it has actually lost its understanding of why or how the Nazis and SS were evil. Hollywood and popular culture – which have always placed more value on aesthetics and beauty than ideas, have become fascinated with the SS and Nazis as symbols of evil, but not as actually evil. So they pay lip service to the idea that the Nazis are horrible, and the SS are just the worst, and fail utterly to understand that the worst thing of all is human fanaticism, is bullying – the urge to destroy, divested of humanity, and invested with a purpose that confuses ends with means. The ends, for every combat veteran who's spent more than a few weeks in *real* combat, is (1) staying alive, and (2) helping keep one's buddies stay alive. The moment at which Wardaddy decides to stay with his tank, and is then absolutely fine with having his crew with him is the moment, for me, that the movie became both unrealistic and inaccurate, as well as untrue – in part due to Wardaddy's decision to damn his crew, and in part due to the way in which their efforts to stop the Germans were portrayed in valedictory terms, rather than under a mound of opprobrium.

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

speaking Brad Pitt, which is fanatically devoted to the proposition that the enemies of Germany must be stopped at all costs.

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

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'états 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 from 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.