

EXPERIENCING WAR

Trauma and Society from Ancient Greece  
to the Iraq War

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*ARES PUBLISHERS, INC.*  
Chicago, ILLINOIS  
MMVII



# CIVILIAN KNOWLEDGE OF WAR AND VIOLENCE IN ANCIENT ATHENS AND MODERN AMERICA

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*“Just as Graves learned during the war, written documents  
remain a delusive guide to reality.”*  
Fussell 1975, 218.<sup>1</sup>

## Foreword

This chapter is dedicated to my former student, close friend and scholarly collaborator, Col. Ted Westhusing. Ted died serving his country in Iraq on June 5, 2005. One credible version of his story is now told in the first and last chapters of T. Christian Miller’s book on contractor and other corruption in Iraq, aptly titled *Blood Money*.<sup>2</sup> My own opinion can be heard in a discussion with Miller on NPR Boston.<sup>3</sup>

It is a sensitive issue to discuss reports of what soldiers did in the sphere of war and in some cases how they died. In my opinion, it does them dishonor to falsify these things. One example of the damage done by such misrepresentation by our government or military is re-mythologized in the account of Iwo Jima flag-raiser Ira Hayes in Bradley and Powers 2000. We may contrast the popular song version of the flag-raising in “The Ballad of Ira Hayes,” written by Peter Lafarge and made popular nationally by Johnny Cash in 1964.<sup>4</sup> In our current operation in the Middle East, we have the well-known controversy concerning the U.S. military’s intentional misinformation concerning the death in Afghanistan of former professional football player Pat Tillman.<sup>5</sup>

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that my discussion here of the different accounts of the death of Therrel ‘Shane’ Childers is not meant to take away from his bravery and his commitment to a life of military duty and honor. But it is my strong belief that the jingoism of such accounts, criticized by distinguished veteran-writers of all of America’s twentieth-century wars, does a disservice to our country and contributes to bad political decisions.

The contrast with the honesty of ancient Greek ‘war reporting’ is a main theme of my chapter.

### **War Reporting in Ancient Greece and Today**

The work of Jonathan Shay and Larry Tritle has demonstrated that the psychological realities of western warfare are universal and enduring.<sup>6</sup> Societies and individuals use ‘myths’—broadly construed to include epic and elegiac poetry, drama, history, biography, short stories, novels, memoirs, oral accounts, official government records and reports, print and broadcast news, documentary and ‘fictional’ film, letters, psychotherapeutic transcripts, scholarly studies, and public monuments—to deal with these realities, whether honestly or falsely, in a constantly renewed effort to reconcile human beings, successfully or not, to killing other human beings.<sup>7</sup>

One startling aspect of the modern condition of warfare (from World War I onward) is the concerted effort made by governments and the military to hide the realities of battle from their civilian populations. To begin with, we should make clear a point that is often not acknowledged, especially by concerned veterans of war. There are good intentions in some quarters for, to paraphrase Vietnam veteran and author Tim O’Brien, taking the ‘shit’ out of reports of war that are reaching civilians back home.

The opinion page editors of the *Austin American-Statesman*, for which I have been writing regular editorials for eight years now, have twice refused to use the word ‘shit’ and once the word ‘fuck’ in pieces in which I was discussing the experience of soldiers in or after combat, even though I was directly quoting a famous American author and a soldier wounded in Operation Iraqi Freedom. My editors believe that such language does not belong in a public newspaper, no matter what the topic.<sup>8</sup> If such bowdlerizing is standard modern practice in American newspapers in such small matters of language, it is natural that editors and other authorities sanitize images and words concerning the greater obscenities and moral ambiguities of war.

This does not mean, however, that such purging of language, pictures and information about what happens in the sphere of war is healthy for modern societies or for modern soldiers. This lies at the heart of the main questions we shall examine here, as we compare the ancient Greek experience of war with the modern

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American (and European) experience. How do civilian populations in societies learn about war? What do they know? What should they know?

Here we will explore some of the differences between ancient Greek society and modern societies in regard to the knowledge that civilian populations have about war, and what those differences mean for the soldiers who do the fighting and for the decisions those societies make about whether and how to conduct war. We shall analyze one conspicuous example of how information from the earliest stage of what is called the 'combat phase' of the ongoing war in Iraq was manipulated in order to present the actions of American soldiers in Iraq as 'heroic' and worth the costs paid by those soldiers and by the people of the United States as a whole. We shall see that this kind of manipulation of events, really a 'mythologizing' or false glorification, has a long tradition in high western culture throughout the twentieth century and now into the twenty-first century.

The generally acknowledged exception to expurgated war coverage in the modern period in the United States is the Vietnam War.<sup>9</sup> After Vietnam, careful measures were taken by the United States government and military to limit or otherwise control the movements of journalists and photographers within war zones. Exclusion was used during the Grenada operation in 1983, 'pooling' during Operation Desert Storm, and 'embedding' during what we ironically call the short official combat phase (41 days: March 20 – May 1, 2003) of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Exclusion speaks for itself. No reporters were allowed to get near combat areas. The 'pooling' system was a way of hand-dispensing officially approved information to restricted groups of reporters who had also been pre-approved by the U.S. government. This system clustered reporters together in assigned locations, often far from the real action, prevented them from asking meaningful questions of combatants, and finally censored what they wrote.<sup>10</sup> Embedding was an ingenious variation on the pooling tactic. Bill Katovsky and Timothy Carlson, in their oral history of reporting during the combat phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom, aptly use Michael Corleone's advice from the Francis Ford Coppola's mafia film *The Godfather, Part Two* to explain

why the United States government used embedding: “Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.”<sup>11</sup>

Over six hundred embedded reporters participated. When they were in the field, they were restricted to military units. Their safety depended on the soldiers in these units and they naturally bonded with these soldiers over time. Such compromising of the neutrality of reporters because of the understandable sympathy they have for soldiers of their own nationality is part of any war, but it was more intense during the Iraqi Freedom *Blitzkrieg*, because of the strict limitations imposed on freedom of movement. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Geoffrey Mohan made this comment about the effects of embedding on his objectivity: “No matter how much you guard against it, you start to identify with the people that you’re embedded with... you lose sympathy toward the enemy dead, or those you classify as the enemy,”<sup>12</sup> The ‘combat phase’ of the war was viewed through six hundred periscopes, making it virtually impossible to see the extent of collateral damage or even the full extent of American casualties, dead and wounded.

There is a century-long tradition of controlling and manipulating information from the war front for civilian populations back home. One example must suffice. It comes from Paul Fussell, a veteran of the land war in Europe in World War II.<sup>13</sup>

On July 25, 1944, American General Omar Bradley, coiner of the famous phrase “nothing succeeds like excess,” discouraged by the inability of Allied forces to break through the German defensive position, decided to use fighter bombers and B-17s to bomb the Germans. The problem was that these planes were designed for obliterating cities—big targets—not for delicately precise bombing when enemy and friendly troops were barely separated on the ground.

The official results were that 1,800 B-17s and 550 fighter-bombers plus 1,000 artillery pieces killed 111 U.S. infantry and wounded about 500 more. Correspondent Ernie Pyle was there:

*Having been caught too close to these things before,  
I...picked a farmyard about 800 yards back of the  
kickoff line.*

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*And before the next two hours had passed, I would have given every penny, every desire, every hope I've ever had to have been just another 800 yards back. There is no description of the sound and fury of those bombs except to say that it was chaos, and a waiting for darkness. Casualties, including casualties in shock, were heavy. Men went to pieces and had to be sent back. The company was shattered and shaken.*

Pyle describes himself squirming like an eel to get under a heavy wagon.

Yet, as Fussell reports, Associated Press and Wide World Photos ran a picture in newspapers and magazines around the world of “GIs frantically digging out their buddies from ruined foxholes.” The accompanying caption read: “After *German* [*sic* italics mine] shelling, Yanks dig out men buried in their foxholes.”

Even when facts are known, modern societies can deny the obvious.

Despite the awful and almost incomprehensible statistics of World War I—65,038,810 troops mobilized, 8,538,315 killed and died, 21,219,452 wounded—British campaign medals given to every soldier who served bore the words “For Civilization.”<sup>14</sup> Two impressions of the first edition of the poems of Wilfred Owen, the starkest and most photo-realistic of the war poets, and perhaps the most celebrated now, were published in 1920 and 1921. By 1929 they had sold together fewer than 1,430 copies. The war made no sense, so human beings collectively had to pretend it made sense and keep their pretense safe from reality.<sup>15</sup>

Another characteristic feature of our modern American treatment of war is that no major popular films about the Vietnam War, except the unrealistically ‘patriotic’ *The Green Berets* (1968), were produced until well after the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. Classic Vietnam war films such as Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Hal Ashby’s *Coming Home* (1978), Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986), and Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) are decidedly post-war commentaries. *Missing in Action*, the first of Chuck Norris’ string of popular, patriotic and unreservedly pro-

GI POW rescue adventures was released in 1984. While the war in Vietnam was going on and American lives were at risk, even 'fictional' handling of the war for mass viewing was 'taboo' or too difficult to negotiate artistically, ethically, propagandistically or profitably.

If we turn to the classical world, the handling of war is much different. Homer's *Iliad*, Greek tragedies (most notably Euripides' *Trojan Women*), and the comedies of Aristophanes such as the *Peace* and the *Acharnians*, portray war, political opinions about war, and the effects war has on citizens and combatants on both sides with graphic and frank honesty. The three plays that I just cited were written and performed at public festivals in Athens during the course of the long and dehumanizing Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) between Athens and her subject allies and Sparta and the member city-states of what was known as the Peloponnesian League.<sup>16</sup>

The Greek historian Thucydides, himself an Athenian general in the early stages of the Peloponnesian War, saw at the outset of hostilities that the war would be of a magnitude unmatched in the ancient Greek experience, a true equivalent of our twentieth-century world wars. Still, in the middle of such a war, Euripides could portray for the broad citizen public the slaughter of innocent women and children by conquering Greek forces; and Aristophanes could satirize political leaders who missed opportunities to put a lasting end to the war. The Athenians at war tolerated overt political criticism, and they saw a need to represent to the public the consequences of their own military policies and actions.

The *Iliad* of Homer was the Greek 'national' epic. The *Iliad* was realistic about war. It gave the Greeks an honest picture of almost all aspects of warfare. This included:

(1) what Jonathan Shay calls betrayal of 'what is right' (the Greek word is *themis*), a chief factor in creating Post Traumatic Stress in soldiers, in ancient and modern times;

(2) REMF ("Rear Echelon Mother Fucker") screw ups;

(3) high command disregard for the well-being of the common troops;

(4) a wide spectrum of soldierly behaviors from cowardice to courage;

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(5) the tragedy of war for civilians in a city under siege and ordained to be taken and destroyed;

(6) 'berserker' rage;

(7) fellow feeling for the enemy, most famously in the private 'truce' between the Trojan ally Glaucus and arguably the best Greek warrior *in action* in the *Iliad*, Diomedes;

(8) the truly human affections of a king named Priam and a queen named Hecuba for their son Hector, the champion and leader of the Trojan allied force; their affections are publicly displayed in gut-wrenching personal terms with no thought for political delicacy or spin;

(9) the love of Hector, whose very name means 'holder' or 'preserver' of his city, for his son Alexandros or Astyanax and his wife Andromache—and her fierce attachment to Hector who she says is her husband and also must be for her the seven brothers and father whom Achilles slew and the mother whom he enslaved and ransomed and who now also lies dead;

(10) the gory, clinically accurate violence of its 200+ detailed combat deaths;

(11) war conducted for less than noble purposes;

(12) the betrayal of soldiers by the gods to whom they pray, i.e., the general ineffectuality of piety;

(13) the *kharme* (or joyful pleasure) men take in war, or as the war leaders in the *Iliad* formulaically put it, the pleasure they activate through memory;

(14) death upon death upon death—before Achilles' men, known as the Myrmidons, arm for battle in book 16, they are likened to sated wolves from whose mouths and muzzles gobbets of flesh and congealed blood mix with the waters of a pool at which they lap;

(15) the role of blind luck in war in determining whether individual soldiers live or die;

and finally (16) what von Clausewitz, over two millennia later, called the 'fog of war.'

Contrast the modern American experience. Vietnam veterans such as Tim O'Brien use the 'John Wayne' movie portrayal of war as the benchmark for seductive illusion-making that gave young men—boys, really—false opinions about what 'fighting for their country' in Viet Nam would entail. Inductees and potential recruits should have been given instead the equivalent in that

period of Medical Department, United States Army *Surgery in Vietnam* (Office of the Surgeon General and the Center of Military History United States Army Washington, D.C. 1994).

Why weren't they? Part of the answer is that twentieth (and now twenty-first) century civilians seem more and more complacent about being kept in a state of ignorance about violence taking place in distant zones of war and about the effects that violence is having upon their fellow citizens, or now even non-citizens, who are fighting as soldiers.<sup>17</sup>

This phenomenon is conspicuous already in World War I and explains the vehement anger and irony which soldier poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen directed against their own civilian populations.

Owen's famous poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est"<sup>18</sup> is addressed to imagined home-front readers, who are patriotic because they know nothing of the horrors and tragic futility of trench warfare. It confronts them with a straight vision of the panic of soldiers attacked by gas. He calls the soldiers' reaction "an ecstasy of fumbling." These may well be the four most beautifully strung-together words in English-language poetry. But they lead directly to a vision of horrifying results that shock complacent readers at home into some form of understanding.

*If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.*

Perhaps most exceptional is the fact that Owen sent this poem to his mother in August 1917 with a note: "Here is a gas poem, done yesterday."

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Sassoon certainly would have done no such thing, since he was trapped by Victorian attitudes to spare ladies the discomfort that might arise from such images, even while he includes them among the civilians he excoriates for their comfortable and profitable, naive and romantic ignorance. Sassoon is angry at those on the home front who do not share in, or even acknowledge, the suffering of soldiers in the field and who support, passively or actively, the government decisions that cause deaths and woundings, physical and psychological, on a scale that had never been seen before.

The list of types Sassoon portrays in his poems is long:<sup>19</sup> privileged gentlemen safe and insensible in their London clubs; vicars and bishops pontificating in their chapels and cathedrals about courage and the role of God in the deaths and maiming of soldiers on both sides; veterans of pre-mechanized war speaking with bravado in pubs; proud mothers, lasses, yellow-pressmen, members of parliament, cheering crowds at public parades, even tombstone-makers lamenting the fact that so many corpses are left to rot in No Man's Land or are interred in cemeteries on the continent, instead of being transported back home where they would improve the domestic tombstone-carving business.

In different poems, Sassoon imagines his soldiers rushing the newspapermen and skewering them with bayonets, bombing parliament, and driving tanks through music halls—three sure ways to narrow the great divide between home front and war front.<sup>20</sup> Sassoon here is putting into ironic poetic language and images the sentiments expressed later about the same war by Erich Maria Remarque in *All Quiet on the Western Front*<sup>21</sup> and more recently by American soldiers in Vietnam.

Take, for example, the anecdote Michael Herr<sup>22</sup> tells of young Marines in Viet Nam, encountering reporters who later flew off to some rear area base for a hot meal and white sheets.<sup>23</sup> Watching them board a chopper, one young kid soldier said, “Those fucking guys – I hope they die.”

Did any such chasm exist in Greek culture during the heyday of the classical polis (700-400 B.C.E.)? I can think of no cases in which ancient Greek soldiers or veterans, or authors who wrote about them, express the anger and hatred put into words by Sassoon, Owen, and Remarque about such ignorance by so wide a range of folks back home—or felt by common foot soldiers about

the freedom that reporters had in Vietnam to extract themselves from the danger.

### **Explaining the Chasm**

I think this startling difference has to do with several features of the ancient Greek city-state (or *polis*) culture. First, military service was universal for adult male citizens. Main combat service was done between the ages of 18 and 20, but eligibility to serve actively in combat continued until age 55. Consequently soldiers in the field had no reason to complain about ‘Jodies’ back home living in safety and domestic comfort, and perhaps even enjoying the affections and pleasures of their women, or about ‘pogues’ out of harm’s way in the rear.

We can see how prevalent the experience of war was in ancient Greece by doing some simple calculations. We can estimate the adult male citizen population of Athens in the late fifth century now at around 40,000.<sup>24</sup> The standard Athenian war vessel, the trireme, was manned by 170 oarsmen, drawn mainly from the lowest of four Athenian citizen classes, 5 officers, and 25 other crew members and marines. As the Peloponnesian war dragged on, many of these rowers were non-citizen metics (resident aliens) and slaves. But this was not because citizens were shirking their duty. It was because, as the war escalated, they were already serving elsewhere, or they were dead.

If we survey some of the major military operations of the Athenians at the outbreak and during the Peloponnesian War, we can see how many Athenian citizens knew what it meant to be in the field. The siege of Potidaea in northern Greece in 432 BCE eventually used 70 Athenian ships, 3,000 armed infantry hoplites, and 30 cavalry. About 150 Athenians died during this operation, including the Athenian commander Callias. The ill-advised Sicilian expedition midway through the war in 415-413 BCE eventually employed over 207 triremes (the great majority Athenian), over 10,000 hoplites, some 1,300 archers, slingers and light-armed troops, over 300 cavalry or mounted archers and over 130 supply ships. The manning of 207 triremes in one theatre of war alone requires 41,400 men. In the end almost all these men were massacred or enslaved, and their commanders, Nicias and Demosthenes, were executed. The fates of Callias, Nicias and

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Demosthenes indicate that in this period, war did not grant rank many privileges, i.e., it did not let them be REMF's.

The direct experience of the realities of war by these citizen soldiers and their communities was important in preventing a rift between soldiers in the field and citizens back home. Likewise, even during the Peloponnesian War, military campaigns took place within relative proximity of home city-states and were of reasonably limited duration. The Sicilian expedition, which we just briefly surveyed, is the abnormal extreme in both regards. Soldiers would regularly return home and share their experiences with fellow citizens who themselves had past or current combat experience.

In addition, city-states, such as Athens, followed the practice of having customary direct acknowledgement of the loss of lives in annual public funeral ceremonies,<sup>25</sup> the most well-known example being the ceremony in winter of 431/430 BCE, at which Pericles delivered the famous Funeral Oration preserved in Thucydides 2.35-46. There was no attempt to hide or disguise losses—this would have been impossible in any case in communities of such relatively small scale. Athens, with its 40,000 adult male citizens, was a large *polis*.

All these factors brought a real knowledge of war and its costs to the entire Athenian community: individuals, families, extended clan groups (each known as a *genos*) and cross-clan organizations known as phratries (literally brotherhoods), demes (the home townships in which all citizens were registered) and the ten tribes into which the male citizen population was divided. I imagine that every *genos* in fifth-century Athens had a direct experience of the human costs of warfare and knew what was at stake for soldiers and their communities when *polis* armies took to the field. Their male members would have been directly involved in:

(1) the savage fighting of the First and Second Persian War (490-479 B.C.E.);

(2) the Athenian acquisition of empire and measures taken against Delian League members trying to secede (478-431 B.C.E.);

(3) the major Egyptian campaign of the period 460-454 B.C.E.;

(4) the build-up to the Peloponnesian War, and then the major and minor campaigns of the Peloponnesian War (434-404 B.C.E.).

Everyone shared the hardships and sorrows of these wars, and almost constantly. As historian Bruno Keil long ago noted, for the Greeks “peace was a contractual interruption of war, war was not an interruption of peace.”<sup>26</sup>

The citizens of Athens, in fact, all shared the historical memory of 480 BCE, when they had to abandon their city and their ancestral farms to be ravaged by the Persian army. Both Herodotus and Thucydides underscore the high level of intra-polis and inter-polis violence with which Greek citizens were familiar. In short, there was, relatively speaking, no ignorant home front for soldiers to resent.

During the Peloponnesian War the Athenians had their own ‘lost generation,’ equivalent to the great loss of young men that Great Britain suffered during World War I. The Greeks had no illusions about war. They did not have the luxury of thinking that peace is the norm. In Book 1 of Plato's *Laws* (626a) the Cretan participant Cleinias claims: “Peace is just a name. The truth is that every city-state is, by natural law, engaged in a perpetual undeclared war with every other city-state.”

The ‘chasm’ between the civilian sphere and the combat sphere has also been widened by the trend during the last century or so to hide from view naturally occurring and even necessary violence and death within normal civilized life. Lesy<sup>27</sup> discusses, for example, the harmful psychological effects that modern ‘industrial’ slaughtering methods have on human beings in contrast with the traditional practices (the law of *shechita*) of Jewish *shochets*.<sup>28</sup>

In modern slaughter houses, the necessary killing of animals for food is delinked from social ritual. This work is generally done in the manner of an automobile assembly line in order to ensure that the maximum number of animals are killed and butchered each day. Profit is the main concern, and the work is done by socially marginalized people with little regard for the harm it does to their psychological health.

In Jewish ritual, the tools and procedures are literally millennia-old and are part of genuine social rituals designed to acknowledge the ‘murder’ of living creatures that is taking place,

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to honor the animals who (my personalized pronoun here is intentional) are offering their lives, and thereby to protect the emotional and psychological well-being of the ritual practitioner (the *shochet*). The knife, known as a *hallaf* or *sacin*, is itself a sacred implement with a traditionally prescribed form going back to the Old Testament.

To be sensitive in this way to the psychological and social consequences of the taking even of animal life for the good of society naturally creates a predisposition to acknowledge and attend to the well-being of individuals who are asked by society to take lives in other ways, i.e., soldiers who are commanded to take human lives. The Greeks practiced animal sacrifice frequently at public festivals and also had rituals to purify their sacrificial priests and exonerate their communities of 'guilt.'<sup>29</sup>

In two essays written in March-April 1915, or six months after the beginning of the "war to end all wars," Sigmund Freud identified a crucial problem resulting from the widening chasm between civilians and knowledge of socially sanctioned violence. He argued in the first essay "The Disillusionment of the War"<sup>30</sup> that citizens are disillusioned because modern western societies emphasize in their civilian moral codes the strict injunction not to kill or even to do violence to other human beings and then, during war time, command them to forget such prohibitions and others that define proper behavior within "common civilization." Freud further saw that feelings of disillusionment were exacerbated by the refusal of high European culture in the early part of the twentieth century to admit that "the old traditional differences [among nation states] made wars inevitable."<sup>31</sup>

In his second essay, "Our Attitude Towards Death,"<sup>32</sup> Freud proposes bluntly two things that he feels are not generally understood, but which the ancient Greeks, I believe, would have known as fundamental facts of life, namely that: (1) "the history of the world which our children learn at school is essentially a series of murders of peoples";<sup>33</sup> and (2) "[t]he very emphasis laid on the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' makes it certain that we spring from an endless series of generations of murderers."<sup>34</sup> What Freud calls "man's ethical strivings," cumulatively "the inherited property of contemporary men," creates the illusion that peace and security and immunity from violence are the norm. American society in the 20th century and into the 21st century, to

varying degrees, has worked hard, and continues to work hard, to maintain this illusion.

In ancient Greek culture, violence, often graphic and senseless, was intrinsic to major myths of acculturation (e.g., Homer's *Iliad* and Greek tragedies). Violence was familiar to citizens of the Greek *polis*, and was treated directly and honestly in literature and public performance. During the 6th and 5th centuries, too, as we have mentioned, wars were fought by citizen soldiers in such relative proximity to their home *poleis*, with such regular seasonal rhythms of campaigning, and with such prominent home-front rituals for taking note of deaths in combat that the general public was well aware of what had really happened to their fellow citizen-soldiers in military operations.

We propose here that the modern 'disillusioning' effects of war, of which Freud spoke, are made more severe because civilian populations are 'sheltered' from what we might ironically term the 'healthy' ritualized exposure to violence and death that prevailed in ancient Greece and in Europe and the United States before the 20th century. This sheltering takes its most extreme form in keeping civilians from knowing the truth about what goes on in the field of combat.

Here is what the home front felt like to women nurses when they returned from serving in Viet Nam. Even the celebrated realistic television coverage of that period did not communicate to those back home anything like the full experience of combat.

Jackie Knoll, a United States Air Force flight nurse in Viet Nam, remembers her experience this way:<sup>35</sup>

*When I came home most people had no interest in anything about Vietnam, especially from those of us who were there. I remember someone in the service in the United States that did ask me about Vietnam but didn't like what I said. He told me he watched TV every night and saw what was going on in Vietnam and it was nothing like what I said.*

Army nurse Joan Gavert, who worked in surgery and intensive care in Phu Bai, pinpoints the sacred quality of what she had experienced and how it had to be protected from the same kind of people whom Sassoon attacks:<sup>36</sup>

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*It was a special feeling that you kept inside you. You came home feeling oh like, you knew so much, had experienced so much more of life than people around you. I can remember my mom wanting me to get together with my old classmates from school. I had a hard time sitting there with them, listening to them, those that were married talking about their babies, the other ones whether so-and-so was going to call them. I just wanted to scream out, don't you realize there's people dying on the other side of the world, aren't you concerned about that? I didn't open my mouth, but it was just very frustrating. My friends were all into their own little world. They wanted to talk about their babies, their lives now, who they were dating, whether so-and-so would call them, and I just couldn't deal with it because there were people dying on the other side of the world. I thought, don't you understand what's going on in the world?*

'Embedded' reporting and the sanitized media coverage of the Iraqi war produce like effects.<sup>37</sup> We close with a clear example.

In the first days of the war, the death of 2nd Lt. Therrel 'Shane' Childers received wide coverage as the first reported American combat death in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Gordon Dillow, a reporter for the *Orange County Register* embedded with Childers' unit, filed the first story. It appeared on March 22, 2003.<sup>38</sup> In his story, Dillow used the standard war-story *topos* of brave young men coming of age when they get their first taste of battle, the change that occurred in the young men with whom he was embedded, in this case 200 Marines of Alpha Company of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, when they killed and witnessed killing on March 21, 2003. He reports that they were advancing on a burning oil pumping station where they expected to confront an Iraqi army brigade. These Marines shoot and laugh about shooting an Iraqi soldier trying to flee on a motorcycle. Here is the first news Americans learned about how the first American soldier in Iraq, Shane Childers, died:

*Then a half dozen other Iraqis, some of them from the Republican Guard, broke for safety in a brown Toyota pickup and this time the Marines bled too.*

Wildly shooting an AK-47 out the window, the Iraqis wounded a Marine in the stomach. 2nd Lt. Therrel ‘Shane’ Childers, 30, of Harrison, Miss. died soon after, becoming one of the first U.S. combat deaths of the war.

Dillow’s report generated massive news coverage and heroization of 2nd Lt. Childers. A full account of his corpse being brought home for burial in Montana, where Childers and his parents actually lived, appeared in *The Hartford Courant* on April 23, 2003.<sup>39</sup> It was written by a *Hartford Courant* staff writer named Rinker Buck. Buck’s story reports that Childers was shot “while leading his platoon in an assault on a pumping station at the Rumeila oil fields of southern Iraq.” Buck wrote a pathos-laden human-interest story, the kind of ennobling and comforting story that Vietnam war veterans such as author Tim O’Brien and poet Chuck Patterson problematize as distortions of the obscene truths of war, the kind of account the Greeks would never have tolerated.<sup>40</sup>

The flavor of Buck’s article can be captured in two sentences: “Most Americans know him as the first Marine killed in Iraq. But his final journey reveals a most remarkable life of madcap energy, intense achievement and the fiery love of a raucous family.”

Buck later expanded this exercise in soft-patriotic sentimentality into a full book treatment. It never once discusses how or why Childers died. Its title *Shane Comes Home* taps into the strong associations many middle-aged Americans have with the 1950s Hollywood blockbuster *Shane* and its portrayal of wholesome and sturdy family values and the goodness of the morally upright man who is charged to do violence in order to protect good people. The film ends with the well-known scene of the young boy, Joey Starret, who idolizes the title character, calling out as he rides away, “Come back, Shane.”

This kind of hagiography led the legislature in Childers’ ‘home state’ of Mississippi to pass a resolution in his honor (S.R. No. 70 02 / SS26 / R1295) the opening clause of which reads:

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*WHEREAS, Marine 2nd Lt. Therrel Shane Childers (age 30) was among the first two American combat casualties in Operation Iraqi Freedom when he was shot and killed by hostile fire in Southern Iraq on Friday, March 21, 2003, while leading his men into combat.*

Buck's and Dillow's accounts (and the State of Mississippi's resolution) are out of the John-Wayne-film school of myth-making about war. A zany, high-energy all-American boy does his solemn duty by going off to a distant war. There he is "killed by hostile fire" "while leading his platoon in an assault." Notice that Dillow in his first article reports that Childers is killed by six Iraqi soldiers. They are formidable: some, he writes, are from the elite Republican Guard. How he knows this is never made clear.

In Dillow's primary account, the Marines have done the job they were called upon to do. Some of the best Iraqi soldiers are trapped and trying to break for freedom. The situation is one of extreme danger. The Iraqis are shooting a barrage of fire wildly, spraying death, from a speeding brown Toyota pickup. Anyone could be shot. Childers had the bad luck to be the soldier their bullets hit. He was shot in the stomach and died soon after.

What are the realities? In a later article in *Columbia Journalism Review*, Dillow notes matter-of-factly that "a few die-hard Iraqi soldiers in a speeding truck shot and killed Lieutenant Shane Childers."<sup>41</sup> Still later, however, Dillow describes the circumstances in this way.<sup>42</sup> After some sporadic Iraqi gun fire,

*...the strange thing was that Lieutenant Shane Childers was just standing by the side of the paved road when this civilian vehicle starts coming down the road. Nobody could figure out exactly what it was. "What's going on here?" It was a white Toyota SUV and it pulls next to the Marines and all of a sudden, a guy sticks an AK47 out and starts shooting and hits the Lieutenant in his stomach, just below his protective vest.*

People gladly accepted Dillow's first account. It gave them what they wanted to hear: (1) American boys holding to American

values were accomplishing their mission and beating the best the Iraqis had; (2) they were standing up to danger in a standard version of set-force ground war; and (3) in the rare case that an American soldier died, he died heroically and his death was recognized as noble. I italicize in what follows the many elements of Dillow's different versions that contradict one another.

In his first account, a *speeding brown Toyota pickup*, partly full of the *best fighters the Iraqis had*, was *trying to break through the advancing Marines* and escape to freedom. The *danger was profound* as the Iraqi soldiers *sprayed bullets wildly*. Childers, who *was leading his troops in combat*, died a heroic death, a random victim of the hazards of war.<sup>43</sup>

In reality, if it is the reality, Dillow later admits, without acknowledging any problems with such gross distortions, that the *serious Iraqi force guarding the oil station had fled*. A *white Toyota SUV* drove up the road in a scene so incongruous that the Marines, who were *literally standing around* along the road, did not know what was going on or what to do. The SUV *stops* alongside the Marines and a *single AK-47* is pointed out the window and shoots Childers, while his dumbfounded fellow Marines look on.

This kind of drive-by shooting could have happened on a street corner in a bad neighborhood in Los Angeles, Detroit or Miami. There is no hint that Dillow knows how many Iraqis were in what is now an SUV or that any of them were of the elite Republican Guard. In any case, the last fact would be quite irrelevant since the occupants of the SUV and the Marines in this version of the story were not engaged in any kind of 'noble combat.'

On the same day, Dillow explains,<sup>44</sup> a Marine stepped on a small mine which blew off his boot and seriously injured his foot. A photo was taken. It was the first photo of a soldier wounded in action and became controversial concerning whether it should be published in the states. Dillow says it was "tough on readers," and cited the American WW II practice of never showing any photos of American dead.

What might have been tough on American readers, but good for their understanding of what the Iraq war was going to be like, was something like the account of Childers' death offered by Corporal Jesse G. Odom,<sup>45</sup> who served under Childers in Alpha

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Company and directly tended to Childers as he was wounded and dying. Childers' death, if it had been correctly reported, would have been a portent of the terrible urban guerrilla and terrorist warfare that has characterized the long 'post-combat' phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

In Odom's account of the events of March 21, 2003, "my Platoon Commander was shot and killed a couple of feet from where I stood." A truck with seven Iraqis had headed at the Marines at seventy miles per hour, spraying bullets. The Marines hit the truck with "an overwhelming amount of firepower." The truck still moved. The driver amazingly had crouched down and survived. Odom crouched behind a wall because some bullets from the truck were still pinging off the Marines' assault vehicle. The truck slowed to a halt one hundred yards away. Odom ran to Childers who had been hit. Other Marines were opening fire on another car approaching. Odom applied pressure to the wound while a corpsman prepared gauze. Given the threat from the approaching car, Odom carried Childers on his back to a safer position. Childers died a painful death, saying as his last words, "It hurts." Childers' crying and urinating his pants hit Odom hard.

Contrast the kind of bowdlerized presentation Dillow and Buck give us of what happens during war with the following scene in Athens. It is the festival of the Greater Dionysia in late spring 415 B.C.E. Some 14,000 Athenian adult male citizens are viewing Euripides' *Trojan Women* in the Theater of Dionysus. All of them are veterans of war. Many of them have recently returned from obeying the official orders of the Athenian assembly. Just months before they had been sent off to kill all the adult male inhabitants of the island of Melos and to force all its women and children into slavery. They had done their duty. They came back to a home population that understood the realities of war.

The performance of the *Trojan Women* reminds these soldiers, who had killed many men up close and personal, probably with sword and spear, and all the Athenians who ordered them to do this, of what they have done. The Athenians deal with these actions communally. This does not make the Athenians more moral or less moral than we are. In fact, Peter Green argues,<sup>46</sup> I think correctly, that 'morality,' in our modern sense, never enters into what the Athenians did at Melos and how the *Trojan Women* was later received by them. Their chief concern would have been

what course of action was in the best interests of the city-state of Athens in maintaining its power.

But I do think that the Athenian soldiers, who had, from our perspective, terrible blood on their hands, would have been reintegrated into society much more readily than our soldiers returning from Iraq. They would not have felt the disjuncture modern soldiers feel when they return to populations who have little or no understanding of what war is like.

The chasm between war front and home front is as wide as it has ever been. Our government and our military want this to be so. Reporters like Gordon Dillow keep the chasm wide. Dillow explains,<sup>47</sup> “The point wasn’t that I wasn’t reporting the truth; the point was that I was reporting the marine grunt truth—which had become my truth.” But this is a lie, and it isn’t even a noble lie. It hides the truth from civilians back home and gives them a false basis for forming their political opinions. It has a big cost.

And it is not even the marine grunt truth. That is found in Jesse Odom’s straightforward account of how Childers died. In pain, in fear, ingloriously, and in ways that made Odom wonder, on the second day of fighting, why Marines were sent to lose their lives so senselessly in Iraq.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Graves (1960, 235) himself declared that one lasting legacy of his service in World War I was “a difficulty in telling the truth.” Fussell (1975, 203-220) analyzes the extent to which Graves’ accounts of his war experiences (and accounts of war by others at other times) do not convey the truth about what happened. This is a theme explored by Vietnam veteran Tim O’Brien in the stories he tells in *The Things They Carried* (O’Brien 1990).

Soldiers being uncertain about the truth, ‘heating up’ the truth, or even trying to keep their experiences sacred among their fellow soldiers (Broyles 1984) is different from journalists distorting, or not caring to find out, what really happened in combat, so that their stories can support particular political perspectives (see below, note 43). In my opinion, reporters have a social obligation to acknowledge where they were not able to ascertain what happened or where they were not adhering to their normal standards of fact-finding and fact-checking.

<sup>2</sup> Miller 2006, 11-18 and 278-86. See also now Bryce 2007.

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.onpointradio.org/shows/2005/12/20051206\\_a\\_main.asp](http://www.onpointradio.org/shows/2005/12/20051206_a_main.asp) (accessed January 30, 2007).

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<sup>4</sup><http://www3.clearlight.com/~acsa/introjs.htm?/~acsa/songfile/Balladir.htm> (accessed January 30, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Coll 2004; White 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Shay 1994 and 2002; Tritle 2000. See also Tatum 2003, and Palaima 2001 and 2003a. Palaima 2000 discusses how the experience and perceptions of foot soldiers and their attitudes about true courage and successful leadership in combat have stayed similar from the time of Homer to the Vietnam War.

<sup>7</sup> On the psychological effects of killing on human beings, even killing at the expressed command of their own societies and leaders, and the importance of developing social rituals that acknowledge and treat these effects, see Burkert 1983 (for Greek antiquity) and Grossman 1995 (for modern times).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. embedded reporter Gordon Dillow (Dillow 2004, 49) on the language used by young Marines in Iraq: "Every fucking word was fucking this or fucking that....It's a construct that they use and in a way it gets poetical—the way they can string these 'fucks' together....But you can't put that in a family newspaper." On problems with language in describing war and dealing with it legally and politically, see Dawes 2002 and Palaima 2002.

<sup>9</sup> See generally Ferrari and Tobin 2003, Katovsky and Carlson 2004, and Palaima 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Amanpour 2003a and 2003b.

<sup>11</sup> Katovsky and Carlson 2004, XIII.

<sup>12</sup> Mohan 2004, 262-63.

<sup>13</sup> Fussell 2003, 45-52.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis n.d. On European attitudes about the First World War, before and after it was fought, see generally Palaima 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis n.d.

<sup>16</sup> For details discussed here concerning the Peloponnesian War and Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War, see Strassler 1998, the best comprehensive edition with translation and informative appendices on such things as triremes, methods of waging war, and the workings and makeup of the Athenian *polis*.

<sup>17</sup> Baker 2006, 18, observes rightly, "The most disappointing realization about the war in Iraq is how little we care, how precious few demonstrators there are on either side of the issue. Just as war exists for most of us on television, so we have subcontracted out our civic feeling to the angry rhetoric of so many ranting heads. We do not serve, we do not pay, we do not watch, and we do not object."

<sup>18</sup> Owen 1964, 55-56.

<sup>19</sup> "They," "The Choral Union," "The Tombstone-Maker," "Fight to a Finish," "Editorial Impressions," "Suicide in the Trenches," "Glory of Women," and "Their Frailty" in Sassoon 1947, 23, 24-25, 27, 77-79.

<sup>20</sup> See "Blighters" and "Fight to a Finish" in Sassoon 1947, 21 and 77.

<sup>21</sup> Remarque 1929.

<sup>22</sup> Herr 1977, 209. It is quoted in Larry Tritle's highly critical review (Tritle 2005, 159-161) of Hedges 2002.

<sup>23</sup> This 'reality' was confirmed for me in my TC 357 War and Violence seminar at UT Austin (March 9, 2004) by journalist Michele Kay. Kay was in

Viet Nam during the Vietnam War. She knew Michael Herr and respected his work. She spoke from experience of the journalists who choppered out of combat areas, sometimes in company with sealed body bags, not only to hot meals and clean beds, but also to the elegant French restaurants, wine, women, narcotics, and the like back in Saigon.

According to Kay, Michael Herr was one of many avant-garde journalists who came to Vietnam to cover the war, because they thought that war was romantic, Hemingwayesque. They liked the myth. But the war quickly lost its romanticism, and these journalists became cynical. This caused them to stop writing objectively (i.e., in a balanced way), because they viewed the daily official military briefings (known in journalistic slang as the 'Five O'Clock follies') as what we would today call 'spin', i.e., intentional falsification of what was going on. The military, for its part, did not know how to deal with these journalists. They allowed them to go anywhere and see anything.

<sup>24</sup> Sallares 1996, 1221-22, goes over the evidence for the population of Athens. The old traditional figure was 30,000 adult male citizens in the late 5th century. Reckoning from the manpower demands of Athenian military ventures in the mid to late fifth century, a new figure as high as 50,000-60,000 has been proposed. But this, obviously, is circular reasoning in the current context. 40,000 seems to be a good conservative working figure.

<sup>25</sup> Loraux 1986.

<sup>26</sup> This point is stressed by de Romilly 1968.

<sup>27</sup> Lesy 1987, 71-87.

<sup>28</sup> Lesy 1987, 115-32.

<sup>29</sup> Burkert 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Freud 1953-74a.

<sup>31</sup> Freud 1953-74a, vol. 14, 278. Freud considers the cultural illusions fostered by supposedly civilized states about the possibility that war had been eliminated a kind of blind and elitist hypocrisy.

<sup>32</sup> Freud 1953-74b.

<sup>33</sup> Freud 1953-74b, vol. 14, 292.

<sup>34</sup> Freud 1953-74b, vol. 14, 296.

<sup>35</sup> Steinman 2000, 79.

<sup>36</sup> Steinman 2000, 110-11.

<sup>37</sup> Matsakis 2007, 16, gives the example of a USAF veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom who flew twenty missions in Iraq. "What bothers him is his feeling that most Americans don't really understand how ugly war can be or appreciate the hardships of the soldiers and civilians living in war zones. He faults the media for this, for giving Americans such a sanitized view of war."

<sup>38</sup> Dillow 2003a.

<sup>39</sup> Buck 2003.

<sup>40</sup> O'Brien 1990, 68: "...[y]ou can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to evil." Compare Patterson's poem "War Story" in Patterson 2002, 11-12.

<sup>41</sup> Dillow 2003b, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Dillow 2004, 50.

<sup>43</sup> Just as with my analysis of Chris Hedges' notorious account of Israeli Defense Force soldiers cold-bloodedly luring forth and murdering Palestinian

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children in Gaza (Palaima 2003b), the variants in Dillow's versions cast doubt on whether he actually saw the events about which he reports.

Note especially the variants in concrete, non-subjective, details, like the make and color of the Iraqi vehicle, whether it was speeding or had pulled to a stop, whether it was continuously spraying bullets or only fired from a single AK-47 once it had pulled up alongside Childers and the Marines who were standing around. Both versions are contradicted by the firsthand account of Corporal Jesse G. Odom who tended to the wounded Childers. In fact, they seem to be made up of elements of what actually happened in order to create the particular effects that Dillow desired. The original report that a 'brown pickup' was half-filled with Republican Guard soldiers appears to be a complete invention by Dillow in order to 'heat up' his story.

<sup>44</sup> Dillow 2004, 50-51.

<sup>45</sup> Odom 2003. Odom's account appeared for a time on-line on the now defunct Web site [www.iraqwarveterans.org](http://www.iraqwarveterans.org) and was written August 27, 2003. I fortunately printed a copy.

<sup>46</sup> Green 1999.

<sup>47</sup> Dillow 2003b, 33.

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