Commentary

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The war that was, and the war that we saw

"You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth [about war]. If you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote."

— Tim O'Brien, "How to Tell a True War Story"

Wars have a way of putting new words into our cultural vocabulary, mainly because human beings are most inventive when devising ways to kill other human beings.

Before World War I, says Paul Fussell, "[t]he word 'machine' was not yet invariably coupled with the word 'gun.'" World War II gave us "snafu" for a predictably senseless situation.

The opening of the Vietnam documentary "Dear America" introduces viewers to new phrases such as "search and destroy" missions. The book on which it is based puts new words in a long appendix: body bags, zippo raids, fire fights and M-16s. A World War I soldier prayed for a "blighty wound" that would rescue him from the hell of war. In the Vietnam lexicon, a non-crippling "million-dollar wound" plucked soldiers from "body-count" warfare and deposited them back in "the world."

American know-how, responding to Nazi efforts at the end of WWII, came up with atomic bombs that we used on two Japanese cities. In WWI, not satisfied with machine guns and tanks, the high cultures of France and Germany used poison gas. These instruments of death are so ghastly that we refer to them now as weapons of mass destruction.

A reader wrote me claiming that we Americans know all about the realities of war because we have watched movies such as "Saving Private Ryan" and "Black Hawk Down." One response to such an idea is to quote Gen. Anthony McAuliffe, commander of the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, Belgium, in 1944. When asked by the Germans to surrender, he said: "Nuts."

Watching Hollywood movies about war, no matter how graphic, does not give us war. We come away feeling sad, but good, almost ennobled. Private Ryan is eventually saved. Our men display valor and some even survive in Mogadishu, Somalia.

In all the great wars of the 20th century, our losses of fighting men and women have been much lower in hard numbers and proportional to our large population than those of other countries whose citizens now show less zeal than we do to go to war. World Wars I and II and the Vietnam war killed and maimed, psychologically and physically, many Americans and destroyed many families. But it left the many of us virtually unaffected.

Notice how quickly coverage of the war in Iraq has ceased to dominate the news. We follow war as long as the action is dramatic and presented by glamorous talking heads in a relatively bloodless format. The aftermath of war has less entertainment value, and viewer ratings plummet.

In this war, we were mostly sheltered from views of the human carnage. Newspapers such as The New York Times ran some graphic footage, but even it tried to protect its readership. For example, on April 12, its front page had a reassuring photograph of Donald Rumsfeld plotting strategy with generals at the Pentagon and President Bush visiting a wounded soldier at Walter Reed Army Hospital.

Away from the front page, we read that 39 of 40 hospitals in Baghdad were not functioning. A single photo showed three hospital workers at just one hospital at one moment stacking piles of mangled Iraqi civilian corpses, many of children, in a refrigerated truck. We were not even invited to extrapolate.

We are reluctant to look at war, and our government does a good job of obliging us. It speaks to us not of war, but of desert storms and freedom operations. This is nothing new. The Battle of the Somme took place on July 1, 1916; 110,000 British troops attacked. On that one day, 60,000 people were killed or wounded. They accomplished nothing. The official report read: "British troops have broken into German forward system of defenses.... French attack on our immediate right proceeds equally satisfactorily."

British minister of war David Lloyd George commented on the war, "The thing is horrible and beyond human nature to bear. ... But of course [the people] don't — and can't — know.... The correspondents don't write, and the censorship wouldn't pass the truth."

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