The Iliad doesn’t flinch from war’s brutal truths

Three and a half years ago, when U.S. soldiers were only fighting in Afghanistan, I wondered in a column how we would finally have an American “Iliad,” a work that would witness the costs, necessities and realities of war.

Natural disaster in New Orleans and Mississippi has pushed the wars we once were fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan off the front pages, except when sui­cide bombers rack up large numbers. And we focus now on the edge or half­accept­the­blame game for the poor response of our down­sized and out­sourced federal and state govern­ments to the hurricane’s local disasters.

We also have been seduced into be­lieving that a down­sized, all­volunteer army — recruited by so­ phisticated advertising appeals to patriotic fervor or to military­service­as­the­one­possible­route­to­college­funding, job skills and a better future — will eventually do to our country’s social and political fabric as the one possible route to college funding, job skills and a better future.

a few years back, some of us hoped “Saving Private Ryan” would be our “Iliad.” Steven Spielberg had laudable intentions. “I didn’t want to make something it was easy to look away from,” he said. And indeed the opening scenes fulfilled this promise. But the movie soon swung around to a typical John Wayne script. So much so that it has been called “very good entertainment.”

writer Paul Russell said, “I’d like to recommend the retention of and fa­miliarity with the first few minutes of Steven Spielberg’s ‘Saving Private Ryan’ depicting the landing horrors. Then I’d suggest separating them to constitute a short subject, titled ‘Omaha Beach: Aren’t You Glad You

Weren’t There?’ — which could mean, ‘Aren’t you glad you weren’t a con­scripted­working­class­or­high­school­boy in 1944?” The rest of the Spielberg film I’d consign to the purgatory of those boys’ bad adventure films end up.”

“‘The Iliad’ gave the Greeks war and made it unforgettable. In fact, the Greek word for ‘truth,’ alethes, means just that. Whatever it modifies cannot escape notice,” “cannot be forgotten.”

“The Iliad” gives an honest picture of all aspects of warfare: betrayal of “what is right;” egotistical high com­mand foul ups and their consequences for the common troops; a wide range of behaviors, from cowardice to cour­age; the tragedy of war for civilians in a city under siege and ordained to be taken and destroyed; “berserker­­rage; fellow feeling for the enemy, most famously in the private ‘truce’ between Trojan Hector and his Greek­enemy­friend Achilles, the noblest Greek warrior, is seen in Jessen Auditorium, Horner Rainey Hall, at the University of Texas?” It will be unforgettable, I promise.

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin. See www.utexas.edu/cola/plan2/news/05_lombardo/