Commentary

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'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 when we would finally have an American "Iliad," a work that would reveal the costs, necessities and realities of war.

Natural disaster in New Orleans and Mississippi has pushed the wars our troops are still fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan off the front pages, except when suicide bombers rack up large numbers. And we focus now on the dodge or half-accept-the-blame game for the poor response of our down-sized and out-sourced federal and state governments to this large-scale crisis.

We also have been seduced into believing that a down-sized, all-volunteer army — recruited by sophisticated advertising appeals to patriotic fervor or to military service as the one possible route to college funding, job skills and a better future — can win wars most of us really don't want our own loved ones to fight.

Ironically, prominent historians of classical Greek warfare such as Victor Davis Hanson and Donald Kagan have argued for preemptive warfare and unilateral assertion of power, in direct contradiction to the lessons that most thinking human beings derive from the fate of classical Athens in the second half of the fifth century B.C.E. And they, like us, have not addressed what damage an all-volunteer army — something tantamount to a mercenary force and rightly unimaginable in the ancient Greek city-states — will eventually do to our country's social and political fabric.

We really do need an "Iliad" to bring us back to reality. The movie "Troy" held promise, but its director thought that the key to understanding the meaning of the quintessential Western story of war was that Achilles is Superman and Hector is Batman. So "Troy" gave us entertaining costume epic and soap-opera emotions and special effects.

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 World War II veteran and war writer Paul Fussell 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 conscripted working-class or high school boy in 1944?' The rest of the Spielberg film I'd consign to the purgatory where 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; "berserker" rage; fellow feeling for the enemy, most famously in the private "truce" between the Trojan ally Glaucus and the great Greek warrior Diomedes; the truly human affections of a king named Priam and a queen named Hecuba for their son Hector, affections that are publicly displayed in gut-wrenching personal terms with no thought for political delicacy or spin; the love of Hector, whose very name means "holder" or "preserver" of his city, for his son Astyanax and his wife Andromache — and her fierce attachment to Hector; the gory, clinically accurate violence of over 200 detailed combat deaths; war for less than noble purposes; betrayal by the gods and the ineffectuality of piety; the joyful pleasure battle can give some men; the role of blind luck in combat; and even what von Clausewitz, more than two millennia later, called the "fog of war."

"The Iliad" is the quintessential myth of war, even if it doesn't have Brad Pitt. It is not propaganda. Achilles, the noblest Greek warrior, is alienated by his commander-in-chief Agamemnon and withdraws himself and his men from the Greek coalition.

And the noble Hector admits to feeling public shame for having squandered a good part of the Trojan army through his own mistaken strategy. And when Hector finally faces Achilles, he runs as fast as he can and only stops running when he is deluded by the goddess Athena. Ironically, none of this truth ever stopped Greek citizens from fighting bravely for their city-states.

We do not have an "Iliad." So why not come and hear master translator and scholar Stanley Lombardo perform from "The Iliad" at 7 p.m. today in Jessen Auditorium, Homer Rainey Hall, at the University of Texas? It will be unforgettable, I promise.

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