

ABSTRACT

Sympathy for the Devil: American Imperialism in Film

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While empire-building, and imperialism more broadly, are now generally regarded as unacceptable justifications for military action, the fumes of imperialistic rhetoric that surround military intervention to this day are not so easily dispersed. The post-9/11 age of the War on Terror has reinscribed a worldview steeped in the omnipresence of ill-defined enemies, and a culture of mediated violence required to destroy them. This thesis examines three artifacts of post/9-11 war media: Rod Lurie's *The Outpost*, David Simon and Ed Burns' *Generation Kill*, and Joe and Anthony Russo's *Captain America: Winter Soldier*. Though these media vary greatly in release chronology, content, and contextualization, all contain strains of the same imperialist framing that regards soldiers and soldiering as a point of ideographic support. In exploring how these orientations manifest, I seek a deeper understanding of how post-9/11 war media, whether escapist fiction or dramatized reenactment, participate in information systems that, intentionally or not, positively reinforce the goals of American imperialism, if not its outcomes.

Sympathy for the Devil: American Imperialism in Film

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DEDICATION

To the countless unnamed victims of our own misguided anger

CHAPTER ONE

Building Frames of War

Conceptualization

It would be a vast oversimplification, not to mention a touch too pithy, to say that the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, changed everything. That said, one would be hard-pressed to argue that even now, 20 years removed from the attack itself, we do not still live in the shadow of those four aircraft. In everything from increased screening procedures at airport entrances to the growth of the internal state surveillance apparatus, the age of the Global War on Terror has left indelible marks on American culture, politics, and psyche alike. Beyond these overt impacts, however, 9/11's "ripple effects altered our lives in subtle, often-overlooked ways as well," particularly in our relationship to popular media. (Just, 2021) Whether through Jack Bauer's own brand of "enhanced interrogation" (read: torture) in the TV serial *24* or the performative patriotism of sports games, post-9/11 entertainment media is, in many ways, characteristic of a broader, positive, yet largely unstated cultural orientation towards American imperialism.

If language is the medium through which we negotiate the nature of our reality, then the words, images, and emotions we conjure in describing that reality are the constituent components of our worldview. It follows from this that our understanding of the Global War on Terror, and particularly of America's role within it, is constituted by the words, images, and emotions used to characterize it. While this is equally true of socially-mediated understandings generally, post-9/11 war film bears the distinction of

directing a particular orientation towards the War on Terror as a component of information warfare. In the age of mass surveillance and unseen but ever-present terroristic threats, popular war media has become a key channel through which American citizens are drawn into participation, rather than passive support. The overarching goal of this thesis will be to examine the ways in which the visual media of the Global War on Terror era reiterate and reinforce the structures and ideologies of American imperialism, primarily by engendering a kind of distant sympathy with military personnel. Within this framing, audiences are called to identify with the humanity of those in service, while simultaneously being discouraged from engaging with the metatextual circumstances of the conflict depicted; we may question the particularities of how a war is conducted, but space for critiquing the war itself is limited or nonexistent.

I will examine three pieces of television and film media with releases spanning from 2007 to 2020, all well within the timespan of the Global War on Terror: *The Outpost*, which portrays the Battle of Kamdesh during the war in Afghanistan, the HBO miniseries *Generation Kill*, which follows the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003, and *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, a prominent and successful film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In analyzing the ways in which these media reproduce (or do not reproduce) frames of nostalgia, heroism, and existential threat, I seek to explain how audiovisual media of the Global War on Terror era nominally critique the *outcomes* of American imperialism while failing to meaningfully assign blame to the structures that uphold such ventures. In short, I argue that films and shows of the War on Terror restrict our understanding of modern warfare by rhetorically confining the language of war to the experiences of individual service personnel, Othering the enemy through characterization

as existential threat, and drawing upon nostalgia for an idealized form of American military intervention. All of this feeds into a particular construction of information warfare in which American citizens are no longer mere passive consumers of propaganda, but central components of the existential justification for the War on Terror. In reinforcing, to one degree or another, the omnipresence of terroristic threat, post-9/11 war media demands that all Americans, whether soldiers or civilians, play a watchful role in preventing the next attack-to-come.

Rationalization and Historical Context

To begin, it is necessary to establish a justification for casting American military ventures abroad as manifestations of imperialism. Characterizations of the United States as an empire are not new, though understandings of and orientations towards the concept of America as Empire have changed greatly throughout history. Some scholars, Noam Chomsky prominent among them, argue that discussing the United States as an empire is “rather like talking about triangular triangles,” as even from its inception, America was envisioned as a budding empire of its own. (Chomsky 2008) Westward expansion under the auspices of Manifest Destiny cast the genocide and forcible removal of native peoples as both existentially necessary and divinely ordained. (Miller 2006) Following on this, the American Empire came into its broadest popular emergence in the 19th Century. The Monroe Doctrine, outlined in President James Monroe’s December 2nd, 1823 address to Congress, ostensibly sought to minimize European colonialist influence in the Western hemisphere, as these ventures were held to represent a threat to American interests in the region. (Office of the Historian) It is telling that, not long after its inception, the Doctrine

itself became a tool of justification for America's own colonialist ventures, particularly in South and Central America and the South Pacific.

In perhaps the most significant of these early steps into empire-building, the Spanish-American War of 1898 ended with the US's annexation of Guam, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii, transforming the United States into an overseas colonial power. (Byrne 2017) Following this, American officials continually reinterpreted the Monroe Doctrine to justify direct economic and military action throughout the Western Hemisphere. President Theodore Roosevelt, in December of 1904, outlined a "corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine allowing the United States to exercise international police authority to ensure that "other nations in the Western Hemisphere fulfilled their obligations to international creditors, and did not violate the rights of the United States or invite 'foreign aggression to the detriment of the entire body of American nations.'" (Office of the Historian) This characterization led directly to American intervention in Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, as well as fueling economic ventures such as the construction of the Panama Canal. (Office of the Historian) Despite paying lip service to anti-colonialism, a stance somewhat necessitated by the United States' own history as a rebellious British colony, the Monroe Doctrine and its subsequent interpretations served as justifications for the expansion of American imperialism in the Western Hemisphere.

Even in these early instances of American imperialism, the importance of information warfare was becoming evident. Information warfare, defined by NATO as "an operation conducted to gain an information advantage over the opponent," is not exclusively a component of modern warfare, though revolutions in information-gathering

and distribution have vastly expanded its scope. (NATO 2015) Propaganda has been and remains a core component of information warfare, especially as facilitated by news media. The Spanish-American War in particular represented a turning point in the relationship between the military and the media, as the conflict itself was in large part precipitated by calls within the media for American intervention in Cuba. Newspapers such as the *New York Journal* and *New York World* seized on the destruction of the *USS Maine* off the coast of Havana as the impetus for war, even in the face of evidence that Spain was uninvolved. (Musicant 1998) Media coverage of the *Maine* sinking and of the Cuban crisis more broadly participated in the emerging perception of the United States as an overseas power, a perception bolstered by rhetoric that cast Spain's presence in Cuba as a direct threat to American interests.

Though the proliferation of propaganda through societally established media channels was not novel to the Spanish-American War, "Yellow Journalism," as the practice was dubbed, brought the American public into a new level of participation. Rather than being convinced to support an ongoing war, media consumers were subsumed into the creation of a *casus belli*. Such a relationship irrevocably expanded the scale and scope of information warfare, though the extent of these changes would take some time to set in. Beyond simply seeking to establish information dominance over nominal enemies, the United States now saw its opportunity to build information structures within its own citizenry that could justify imperialist ventures *a priori*. As we will see in discussing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the role of citizens in constructing information landscapes favorable to imperialism has only grown more prominent.

Common to narratives such as those surrounding American military intervention, the Spanish-American War included, is an implicit or explicit assertion that American imperialism is better than the alternative. This relativistic framing relies upon the presence of a threat, enemy, or Other so monstrous that not to intervene militarily would produce the worse outcome. Such justifications are not new or unique, even to the nominally post-imperial era of counterterrorism. Much of warfare is predicated on the idea that, as horrific as war is, it is nonetheless necessary to avert some greater evil. The persistence of this logic can in part be blamed on the lingering effects of World War II, though such justifications are common throughout history. In the United States, and among Allied powers more generally, the Axis (particularly Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan) were regarded as existential threats to democracy and human rights, and not entirely without reason. At the time, both Germany and Japan were ruled by authoritarian governments whose war aims included the forcible conquest of other territories for the purpose of creating an ethno-state, accomplished through the repression or extermination of ethnic and cultural minorities. While equivocating between the actions of the Third Reich and the Japanese Empire (or, for that matter, any two historical powers) is a tenuous practice at best, suffice to say that the attitudes and actions of the Axis powers were productive of a rhetorical frame in which global war actually was the better alternative.

Following the Second World War, the United States emerged as the preeminent military and political power in the world, in no small part due to the colossal expansion of American military recruitment, production, and funding leading up to and during the war. Additionally, America's use of nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima

and Nagasaki at the end of the Pacific War cannot be overestimated in its impact. The United States found itself in an unprecedented position of wealth, power, and influence, a standing bolstered by the (then) unilateral threat of total annihilation by a single aircraft.

The American policy of anti-interventionism, already crumbling since the US joined the First World War in 1917, had been well and truly destroyed. In its place, the United States began to take a distinctly pro-interventionist stance, particularly in relation to the expansion of the Soviet Union. Like the United States, the USSR had emerged from WWII as a dominant military and political force, having pushed its sphere of influence well into Eastern Europe during its campaigns against the German armies. Though the USSR had fought as part of the Allies during the war, the relationship between it and Western powers such as the United States and UK was fraught at best. Anxieties regarding Communism, and towards the Soviet Union more specifically, had emerged in a series of Red Scares following the fall of the Russian Tzarist government in 1917. (Nabb Center) Such tensions only intensified after WWII. In August of 1949, only four years after the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Soviet Union successfully tested their own nuclear bomb. (CTBO) Overnight, the face of global politics and strategy changed. Now, the possession and stockpiling of nuclear weapons was the key division between superpowers and subsidiary nations.

Though the Cold War never resulted in open warfare between NATO and the Warsaw Pact (despite an astonishing number of frighteningly close calls), the decades that came would be defined by a series of proxy wars, most prominently the wars in Korea and Vietnam. While such conflicts did directly involve both NATO and Warsaw Pact military personnel, these proxy wars were characterized primarily as civil conflicts,

with NATO and the USSR (as well as the emerging Chinese Communist regime) throwing support behind their chosen factions. However, as both conflicts progressed, the United States' level of involvement grew too great to meaningfully obscure from the American public. American officials made some efforts to obfuscate or recharacterize these proxy wars apart from established understandings of warfare; the Korean War would be characterized by American officials as a "police action" rather than a true war, (Truman 1950) while the conflict in Vietnam remained ambiguous and officially undeclared for its duration. Nonetheless, the rising costs of these actions, in both material expenditures and human casualties, necessitated an existential justification such as that provided by World War II. Containment offered such a justification.

A thorough explication of Containment Doctrine and its political and military implications is outside of the scope of this thesis, and would take a far greater depth of understanding than I am able to provide. In terms of rhetorical critique however, Containment provides a key conceptual touchstone within my own analysis, namely a reiteration of the kind of necessary intervention that the Second World War came to embody. Containment characterized the expansion of the USSR, as well as Communist ideology more broadly, as a kind of disease, a cancer that would infect and ultimately eradicate the so-called free world. President Harry Truman articulated this danger in a speech to Congress on March 12, 1947, in which he codified anti-Communist resistance abroad as a central tenet of US foreign policy. (National Archives) Containment Doctrine operated alongside the "Domino theory" of international politics, which held that, were one nation to fall under the sway of international Communism, the surrounding nations and, ostensibly, the democratic world, would soon follow. President Dwight Eisenhower,

like Truman, outlined this fear explicitly to Congress. (Parks Service) In defining the lines of conflict thusly, American officials were able to, at least nominally, orient American military intervention around an ethical justification that overrode or obscured political and economic considerations.

Taken as a kind of rhetorical shorthand for the Cold War as a whole, Containment Doctrine positions the United States and its NATO allies as unequivocally in the moral right. Military actions in Korea and Vietnam were rendered necessary by the exigent evilness that Communism and the USSR presented. Under the rhetorical framing that Containment upholds, the US was not only justified in intervening, but morally obligated to do so. If, after all, the outcome of an unfettered Soviet influence was taken to be the forcible conquest of unwilling peoples, the impetus for military action remained largely unchanged from WWII. However, this framing would not go unquestioned, particularly in relation to the Vietnam war. As the war continued to expand in scale, and the toll in American lives rose, many Americans began to challenge the United States' participation in what seemed a distant and isolated conflict, sentiments that coalesced in the various anti-war movements of the 1960s. (Flynn 1993) Ultimately, following the fall of Saigon and the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam on April 30th, 1975, (Hastings 2018) America's involvement in the war came to be remembered not as a moment of moral triumph or military bravery, but as a quagmire of political entanglements, pockmarked by atrocity and shame.

From the division and trauma of Vietnam emerged what has been termed the "Vietnam hangover," a broad cultural desire to explain, obscure, or ignore the realities of American military intervention that had been revealed in Vietnam. (*Asian Affairs* 1975,

Hertzberg 1985) While WWII had certainly not been conducted as cleanly by American forces as our mediated cultural memory might suggest, neither it nor the Korean War embodied the depth of horror and disillusionment that the Vietnam War left behind. WWII had been an unequivocal victory, Korea a tenuously held stalemate. Vietnam, by contrast, was a war characterized by continual disappointment. Presidents Richard Nixon and Lyndon B. Johnson, despite making repeated statements and motions towards total withdrawal, steadily increased the scope of American involvement with new troop deployments and bombing campaigns. (Glass 2012, Coleman & Selverstone 2014) Stories such as that of the My Lai massacre, in which American troops slaughtered a village of innocent men, women, and children, filtered back to the States, leading citizens to question whether American military intervention could truly be productive of any good. (PBS 1997) When Saigon finally fell to North Vietnamese forces, America was forced not only to reckon with defeat, but with the broken pedestal of our perceived military righteousness.

It must be stipulated that the United States was not militarily (or imperialistically) inactive in the years following Vietnam, despite the trauma and reflection prompted by the war. Additionally, characterizing all American military ventures post-1975 as iterations of the Vietnam hangover would be a gross oversimplification, both in terms of military/political analysis and rhetorical critique. Nonetheless, I believe that the Vietnam War represents a crucial turning point in the United States' understanding of its own military role, particularly as it relates to film. Works such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), as well as many others, approached depictions of the Vietnam War through a different lens than comparable films

had with World War II. Rather than emphasizing stories of heroism, valor, and sacrifice, films of the Vietnam era came to be characterized by a focus on horror, trauma, and senselessness. Neither Coppola nor Stone particularly seek to justify the actions their characters take, nor their presence in the war to begin with. However, while such films do not overly concern themselves with saying why American forces *should* be present in Vietnam, neither do they meaningfully question that involvement in the first place.

Certainly part of this is due to the fact that such films are almost always retrospective. Rather than explicitly questioning the necessity of American intervention, Vietnam War film largely presents the war itself as a historical given and seeks an honest portrayal of what those who fought experienced. However, in accepting the presence of the war as simply a brute fact of history, such media inadvertently absolves the broader structures of American military power of any meaningful responsibility in precipitating the conflict being portrayed. This is not to say that films like *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* are not critical of the war they depict; they would not exist as they do apart from established critiques of the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, these films call the audience to empathize with military personnel in part through suffering. We feel for soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines because we recognize them as fellow humans, and consequently recognize their pain and hardship as terrible. What such films leave unquestioned, however, is the framing of such suffering as inflicted solely by the enemy. Though both Coppola and Stone condemn the cruelty, discompassion, and disaffectedness of service personnel in Vietnam, even the worst American is granted humanity and empathy through the inhumanity of their enemies.

Central to my own analysis is the fact that films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and their counterparts privilege the experiences of the American soldier as the sole point of narrative intelligibility. While such a framing provides space for the humanization of American personnel through their experiences of suffering, this room is not provided for the enemies depicted. Enemy forces within these films do not possess rhetorical agency. Rather, they are valenced solely through their opposition to American forces, rendered monstrous by way of trying to kill Americans. This orientation necessarily positions American personnel as morally superior to their opposition. However, what this framing obscures, and what I seek to examine, is a conception of American imperialism in which American military intervention, however horrible its outcomes, is nonetheless justified by the inhuman Other-ness of the enemy.

Methodology and Literature Review

I will examine three multimedia artifacts of the post 9/11 era through close comparative reading: Rod Lurie's *The Outpost*, released in 2020, Ed Burns and David Simon's *Generation Kill*, released 2007, and Joe and Anthony Russo's *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, released 2014. In establishing my method, I draw primarily upon Michael Leff and Michael Calvin McGee in their emphasis upon textual criticism and fragmentation. Leff, following Edwin Black, argues for an "emic" approach to textual criticism, in which "theoretical principles enter at the intersection between the object and the assignment of meaning to it... so closely connected with the object of study that they are not easily isolated in abstract form." (Leff 1980) This approach positions the text itself as the primary locus of critique, rejecting formal, rigorous methodology in favor of interpretive, though not undisciplined analysis. Theory emerges as a result of critical

practice, better able to account for the complex and shifting landscape of rhetorical phenomena.

Leff's strong emphasis on textuality, however, exists in tension with McGee's conception of ideographs, a vocabulary of slogans and symbols that, taken together, constitute the structures of public consciousness. (McGee 1980) To McGee, such objects of examination are necessarily fragmented. What appears as a finished discourse is instead "a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made." (McGee 1990) Thus, texts cannot be meaningfully removed or examined apart from their contexts without being rendered incomplete. To confine rhetorical examination strictly to the contents of the text would effectively make these contents isolated and meaningless. Leff attempts to bridge the gap between textual and ideological critique by proposing a dialectical relationship between the two. Such an approach moves towards "expanding textual criticism into an intertextual arena" by situating fragmentary texts as "an ensemble of paradigm texts constituting an embodied representation of the entire controversy." (Leff 1992) In the context of my own analysis, Leff provides a means by which my chosen texts can be examined as fragments of the greater ideological whole while retaining their distinct rhetorical qualities. Though my objects of examination vary greatly in terms of release chronology, narrative, and composition, I argue that when taken together, they reinforce or, in the case of *Generation Kill*, begin to subvert a shared set of ideological assumptions surrounding America's role in the War on Terror.

Though much of the following analysis will center McGee in my discussion of soldiers-as-ideographs, Leff provides the necessary basis upon which to situate *The Outpost*, *Generation Kill*, and *Winter Soldier* as component texts within the broader

contexts of post-9/11 culture and information war. Taken in isolation, each of my chosen texts reflect distinct orientations towards the American Empire, and provide their own frames of justification or criticism through which aspects of the War on Terror can be understood. However, I believe that stranding the texts in this manner, as Leff and McGee conclude, fundamentally disconnects them from the structures of reality that they claim to represent. Each of the artifacts examined here is in some way critical of the conduct of the War on Terror, *Generation Kill* most overtly so. On their own, these critiques might be regarded as complete as, per Leff (1980), the intersection of theory and meaning-making is so close as make the two inseparable. *The Outpost*'s portrayal of life at an isolated combat posting could, under this view, be seen as the point of praxis at which assigned textual meaning generates theoretical principles that speak to the context of the film, if not necessarily beyond it. However, as McGee (1990) and later Leff himself (1992) conclude, the text cannot stand alone.

Public consciousness of the Global War on Terror exists not so much a discrete set of claims as a collective gestalt. Rather than painting any one state or people group as the defined enemy (though we will discuss confluences of Arab/Muslim identity and terrorism later on), post-9/11 cultural consciousness suggests a worldview defined by stateless, faceless, omnipresent threats. In this way, the backdrop of War on Terror media more strongly resembles McGee's construction of ideographs, a loosely defined set of truth-propositions that orient the understanding of otherwise fragmentary texts. Thus, though *Outpost*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Generation Kill* present their respective wars very differently, none of them can be meaningfully understood apart from the cultural

conscious they inhabit and construct. The shadow of the looming tower (apologies to Lawrence Wright) is always in the way.

Before examining orientations towards violence within post-9/11 media specifically, it is helpful to explore how violence more generally is negotiated through its depictions. Judith Butler, in *Frames of War*, discusses “the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of other as lost or injured,” contending that such frames are “politically saturated. They are, themselves, operations of power.” (Butler 2009) Depictions and constructions of violence do not merely tell us who has been lost, they tell us who is *able* to be lost in the first place. To frame a death as grievable is to admit that some life was there to be lost and subsequently mourned. By contrast, those deaths not rendered grievable are effectively valenced as morally meaningless.

Such framings inevitably find their way into war media, in no small part because such media functions to construct culturally embedded understandings of war. Holger Pötzsch examines the concept of grievability through the narratively privileged position of the “soldier-self,” a trend in war media in which the perspective of service personnel is rhetorically and narratively privileged to such an extent that it becomes the only point reference for the events taking place. (2011) In examining the films *300* (Snyder 2006) and *Black Hawk Down* (Scott 2001), Pötzsch argues that discursive constructions of the enemy as less-than-human render the loss and suffering of soldiers as grievable by and in direct contrast to the inherent inhumanity of the enemy. Through visual language that materially obscures them and narrative framing that denies them rhetorical agency, the enemy is rendered Other, a faceless and malevolent force coming to kill Americans.

(Pötzsch 2011) These depictions represent an orientation in which the enemy can be killed without consequence because of their inhumanity, while by contrast, the soldier-self suffers and dies righteously within the context of a broader existential struggle.

However, while the soldier-self is rendered human, grievable, and thus empathetic to audiences, the positioning of the soldier-self relative to the (presumably civilian) audience is not an equal one. Sarah Maltby and Katy Parry (2016) examine a selection of papers that deal with the performance of soldering in contemporary culture, and outline a perpetual tension between soldiers-as-citizens, and soldiers-as-warriors. Maltby and Parry share a concern that a turn towards personalized media and individualized experiences of war, while encouraging empathy, nonetheless carries the risk of depoliticizing war narratives. (2016) Such media depicts military life as “ordinary and mundane,” (Maltby & Parry 2016) a framing that simultaneously ingratiates soldiers into the civilian view and normalizes, but does not question, their presence abroad. Soldiers and their self-representations, despite a level of familiarity with the civilian experience, remain part of a lifestyle that we, as civilians, are asked to sympathize with and support rather than critique.

The frames of grievability in war media of the post-9/11 era have themselves been influenced by the broader discourse surrounding the purpose of the Global War on Terror. Much of the rhetorical justification for the War on Terror has centered a so-called “clash of civilizations,” a framing of the conflict that pits two eschatologically opposed worldviews in a fight for survival. (Wright 2011) Mark West and Chris Carey examine how President George W. Bush’s rhetoric surrounding the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks reincorporates frontier language and imagery as a means of creating symbolic

convergence to this end. Bush's rhetoric worked to establish a clear dichotomy between America and its enemies, embodied in Bush's assertion that "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." The Bush administration characterized the necessity of intervention in places like Iraq and Afghanistan through the language of "cowboy mythology," utilizing phrases such as "smoke them out" and "Wanted: Dead or Alive." (West & Carey 2006) In doing so, President Bush framed American military action through a narrative in which strength and performative violence were necessary attributes to counter the savagery of the new frontier.

The frontier myth is a construction of American westward expansion that views "the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of Native Americans" as the means by which Americans could forge a new national identity. (Slotkin 1992) In short, frontier mythology acts as an apologia for American imperialism in its rawest form. Though the myth frames violence as a necessary component of creating this new identity, not all forms of violence are regarded as equal. While the frontier hero gains their identity through "temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural state,'" this reversion is distinct from the "savagery" of the frontier itself. (Slotkin 1992) Redemptive violence against indigenous or otherwise uncivilized peoples is the core of frontier mythology, the crucible through which the frontier hero gains their strength. Inherent in this mythic framing, however, is the un-grievability of the frontiersman's enemies. The savage native, like the Persians in *300* or the Somalis in *Black Hawk Down*, exists to threaten the hero, and speaks only in condemnation of themselves.

It should, however, be emphasized again that this is by no means a construction limited to the Global War on Terror. Leroy Dorsey examines how President Theodore Roosevelt utilized frontier mythology to sublimate racial tensions into a cohesive national identity oriented around rugged individualism and self-reliance. Though still very much steeped in the white-supremacist ideals of his day, Roosevelt was nonetheless able to reorient “true Americanism” around physical strength and martial power so as to provide a space in which immigrants and minorities could become Americans, so long as they were willing to “drop their hyphen.” (Dorsey 2007) Roosevelt’s vision of rugged Americanism unified disparate groups and ideologies into a shared identity of strength that, while more inclusive than the alternatives, still defined Americans through opposition to the Other; in Roosevelt’s case, the weak, complacent, and culturally disparate elements of industrialized society. Though more current media rarely reiterates the frontier myth wholesale, discourse surrounding American military intervention nonetheless invokes the precepts of the myth in its emphasis on violence as a redemptive or formative force.

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that Roosevelt’s frontier rhetoric pointed to the *potential* for the American pioneer spirit to be lost, rather than responding to a specific exigence in which it had already been destroyed. Similarly, Barbara Biesecker argues that post-9/11 melancholia acted as the formative force behind “a public ‘political will’ that, with considerable irony, cedes the power of the citizenry to the remilitarized state for the sake of protecting what *will have been* lost [emphasis in original].” (Biesecker 2007) Though the affective processes that Biesecker outlines are very different from the affect of the frontier as outlined by Slotkin and Dorsey, both frontier mythology and the

melancholic rhetoric of 9/11 orient their audiences towards the same end: military intervention for the preservation of an idealized but tenuous American vision. Per Biesecker, citizen-subjects are incited to preemptive violence by the promised loss-to-come of the democratic way of life, (Biesecker 2007) echoing the same channels of popular support that fed Westward expansion and the Spanish-American War. Military intervention thus becomes a necessary pre-condition for securing the American identity. Both frontier mythology and melancholia are productive of a view of American life that sees violent, existential struggle not only as morally right, but necessary.

Of course, as Pötzsch emphasizes, calls for military action necessitate the presence of an enemy that warrants material opposition. Such an enemy must be rendered sufficiently savage or monstrous to cast their lives as ungrievable per Butler and Pötzsch, and therefore worthy of being destroyed. Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner examine the Devil figure as part of a redemptive cycle of war in American public consciousness. Characterizations of America's enemies that cast them as demonic are not unique to the Global War on Terror, but have been applied to criminals, dictators, indigenous peoples, and Communists, among others. (Ivie & Giner 2015) "Exorcising" these demons requires the use of redemptive violence through war, even when such action infringes upon the democratic values that such demons supposedly threaten. Thus, when an enemy is sufficiently Other or the threat sufficiently great, even our most fundamental values must give way so that we can kill the threat.

Thus far, we have established that the rhetoric of American military intervention, both within the Global War on Terror and beyond, is characterized in large part by framings that view intervention as morally or existentially necessary by reference to a

savage, threatening Other. To close, I want to return to trends within modern war media specifically that reflect this orientation towards violence.

Frontier mythology, as examined above, produces a rhetorical frame in which savage violence against the Other is rendered justifiable and necessary by way of the Other's presumed inhumanity. Jason McKahan (2008) argues that depictions of Special Operations Forces (SOF) since the Reaganite era have emphasized this same flavor of performative violence as patriotic praxis. Such films repackage real-world traumas into stories where the good guys win by killing all of the bad guys. These media deemphasize to the point of irrelevance the underlying motivations of warring parties; the audience of *The Delta Force* (Golan 1986) knows, intuitively, that terrorists are evil, and the ones stopping the terrorists are heroic. While certainly problematic when applied to fictionalized narratives of war, such a framing bears even closer examination when transplanted onto real-world conflicts. Robin Andersen (2014) examines *Act of Valor* (McCoy & Vaughn 2012), which, despite claims to authenticity, nonetheless reproduces the same framing of soldiers, SOF especially, as quasi-superheroes, pitted in an unending existential struggle against the vaguely defined forces of terrorism. This stands in stark contrast against the real-world conduct of SOF units in the War on Terror, which functioned (and function) in many respects as state-sanctioned death squads. (Andersen 2014) Tacit awareness of this role requires a normative renegotiation of permissible violence. Unquestioned, films like *Act of Valor* and *The Delta Force* suggest that even the most extreme and morally repugnant measures may be necessary, if not morally permissible, to avert a greater evil.

Taken together, the above literature provides a foundation upon which depictions of American imperialist violence can be understood as embodied within a broader cultural consciousness that sees warfare as a path to personal and national salvation, valenced against the inhumanity of an ever-present yet ill-defined Other. Justifications for violence grounded in perceived existential conflict, as has been repeatedly emphasized, are not new. The artifacts examined here each participate in an ancient redemptive tradition which strives to ascribe meaning to what would otherwise be a litany of senseless death. As humans, we create heroes in the hope that by mirroring or merely honoring their actions, they, and perhaps we, can transcend death. In doing so however, we propagate the systems that maintain the demand for heroes to step forward and be martyred. In examining my chosen texts, I do not so much aim to upend our hero systems as to question our relationship with them, and the role that they play in directing our national fears outwards. If the image of the combat-equipped soldier, so indelibly ingrained in the American public psyche, presents itself as an honorific totem, it is worthwhile to question who or what precisely is being honored.

Preview of Artifacts

The Outpost

Directed by Rod Lurie and released in 2020, *The Outpost* tells the story of the Battle of Kamdesh, one of the largest and deadliest engagements of the Afghanistan War. The film follows a troop of American soldiers circa 2007-2009 during their deployment to Combat Outpost (COP) Keating, which sat at the bottom of a valley, rimmed on all sides by the mountains of the Hindu Kush. Throughout their deployment, the soldiers are

forced to contend with almost daily attacks by rifle and mortar, the unpredictability of who might be killed and when, and perhaps most overtly, the mistrust and hostility of indigenous locals. While one officer in the film defines his and his troops' mission as "separating the locals from the Taliban," (Lurie 2020) the lines between villager and insurgent become more difficult to discern as tensions rise, both between the Americans and locals as well as soldiers and their own chains of command. The film culminates in a massed Taliban attack on the isolated outpost, which, though ultimately repulsed, resulted in 8 American and 4 Afghan soldiers killed, as well as 27 and 10 wounded personnel respectively. The number of Taliban casualties, though not known exactly, is estimated around 200 killed and wounded. (Nordland 2010)

The United States' invasion of Afghanistan, which began on October 7th, 2001, was a direct response to the attacks of September 11th, less than a month earlier. American intelligence agencies had determined that Osama bin-Laden, leader of the militant group al-Qaeda and ostensible mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, was sheltering in Afghanistan with the protection of Taliban authorities. (CFR 2021) Then-president George W. Bush demanded that the Taliban extradite bin-Laden for his role in the September attacks, which the Taliban government refused to do barring unequivocal evidence of bin-Laden's involvement. With this impasse established, the United States began what would become Operation Enduring Freedom by invading Afghanistan, and by December 17th had largely succeeded in ousting the Taliban government. (CFR 2021) However, American and NATO coalition forces failed to capture bin-Laden and other key Taliban and al-Qaeda figures, who were believed to have retreated to Pakistan during the battle of Tora Bora. (Wright 2011) What had initially seemed like a quick victory

rapidly turned to a period of prolonged insurgency. Though the tempo and tenor of the conflict would ebb and flow as time passed, it would not be until 20 years later, on August 30th, 2021, that the last American troops would finally leave Afghanistan. (CFR 2021) In perhaps one of the greatest twists of broad historical irony, NATO forces pulled out of Afghanistan after two decades of war as the Taliban itself rushed in to fill the vacuum.

At the risk of being overly reductive, *The Outpost* represents, at least in terms of my own analysis, a kind of prototype for the visual media of the Global War on Terror generally. This is not to say that *The Outpost* does not possess its own distinct cinematic merits. For my own part, I believe there is much that the film aims for and accomplishes that comparable media does not. However, the visual and narrative language of the film reflects an understanding of the War on Terror that, while nominally anti-war, has little to say in terms of meaningful imperialist critique. *The Outpost* is deeply embedded not only into the visual language of modern war film, but the language of war documentaries. The film's production undertook great efforts to ensure that their rendition of COP Keating looked, sounded, and felt like the real thing. This effort is especially evident upon comparing *The Outpost* to such documentaries as *Restrepo* and *Korengal* (Junger & Hetherington 2010, Junger 2014), both of which cover virtually identical settings to the film. Thus, *The Outpost* establishes narrative and aesthetic authenticity by carefully mirroring the war as captured firsthand. We sympathize with soldiers in the film in part because we understand the horror of their portrayed experiences to be grounded in reality.

However, while this sympathetic authenticity towards soldiers is continually reinforced, whether through satellite phone calls home or unjust orders from distant and

apathetic officers, it is not extended to the apparent antagonists of the film: the Taliban and, arguably, the indigenous locals. Very rarely are Afghans afforded vocal agency in *The Outpost*. When locals question why American troops are in their country, the occupation is, narratively, treated as a given. The American soldiers are there to stop the Taliban, whose understood evilness through their connection to 9/11 renders them justifiable targets. However, the film does not make this connection explicit. In fact, *The Outpost* does little to expand the scope of its examination beyond the barbed wire of COP Keating itself. Within these constraints, Afghan characters in the film speak almost exclusively in condemnation of themselves. Village elders make promises at one shura (tribal meeting) that are broken by the next, or seem to feign obfuscating stupidity in the face of American officers' questions. A young Afghan man is caught infiltrating the compound to take pictures of the surrounding area, ostensibly to provide the Taliban with more detailed information for an attack. (Lurie 2020) We do not see the lives of the so-called ordinary Afghans. We are left instead to infer their existence by distinction, though not separation, from the Afghans that we *do* see, almost all of whom are portrayed as trying to kill Americans. This visual and narrative framing effectively precludes all opportunities for non-American voices to speak in criticism of American actions. After all, how can the enemy morally condemn us, when they're the ones shooting at us?

Ultimately, *The Outpost* does not seem particularly interested in crafting an explicit justification for the War in Afghanistan. While individual soldiers and their actions are presented largely uncritically, the film acknowledges from the outset that the circumstances into which these soldiers were placed were unduly dangerous and strategically questionable, a situation made worse by tensions with higher command.

However, the film's critiques of *aspects* of the Afghanistan War are ultimately eclipsed by its presentation of and conflation between Afghan locals and the Taliban. *The Outpost* maintains a rhetorical understanding of the War on Terror that fails to condemn the central premise: namely, that our presence in Afghanistan was meant to counter an existential threat to the United States. In presenting Afghans as amorphous, omnipresent threats to American service personnel, *The Outpost* precludes condemnation of the War in Afghanistan itself.

Generation Kill

Though they would eventually proceed in remarkably (perhaps horrifically) similar manners, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was begun under much different pretenses than Afghanistan in 2001. While the Taliban's protection of Osama bin-Laden and other al-Qaeda figures provided a direct, if flawed impetus to war, there was no such explicit connection in Iraq. Instead, Operation Iraqi Freedom, as it would come to be called, was justified on more tenuous grounds. Most famously, the George W. Bush administration falsely propagated claims about Saddam Hussein's chemical warfare program, arguing that Hussein's regime was arming to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against Western nations. (CFR 2022) This, alongside assertions that the Iraqi government was sheltering terrorists, led the United States and coalition allies to invade Iraq on March 20th, 2003. A Gallup poll covering the days following, March 22-23, held American public support for the invasion at around 72%. (Gallup 2003)

Generation Kill, produced by Ed Burns and David Simon, is a 7-part HBO miniseries that follows the initial invasion of Iraq through the eyes of a reporter embedded with the First Marine Reconnaissance Battalion, a group of elite scout infantry

generally deployed ahead of the main invasion force. Released in 2007, the series chronicles the invasion from its beginning to its “end” with the capture and occupation of Baghdad, and largely focuses on the day-to-day conduct of the invasion itself, rather than an overarching narrative as in the case of *The Outpost*. Neither Evan Wright, the reporter and series’ POV character, nor the marines he embeds with know their place in the larger strategic plan. Instead, the battalion moves from place to place seemingly at random, with enemies, rules of engagement, and even basic procedures often defined on a case-by-case basis. As a result, *Generation Kill* relies in large part upon a somewhat unique shared emotion between audience and protagonists: confusion.

Where *The Outpost* does not explicitly provide a justification for the War in Afghanistan, *Generation Kill* seems wholly dedicated to hammering in the message that there was and is *no* justification for the War in Iraq. On all levels, the invasion as portrayed by *Generation Kill* was an exercise in misdirected violence, wasted efforts and intentions, and most explicitly within the show, senseless death. In the first episode, shortly after entering Iraq, the battalion’s Bravo Company, call-signed Hitman, encounters a group of armed Iraqis in white pickup trucks marked with red diamonds, who seem to demonstrate hostile intent towards the Marines. Despite requests by a platoon commander, Lt. Fick, to engage or capture the militants, Hitman’s commander orders the Lieutenant to “wave off” the Iraqis. Fick complies, and the Iraqis withdraw, laughing and jeering at the Americans. (Burns & Simon 2007)

Later, at the end of the episode, Hitman comes across Iraqi civilians moving away from the battalion’s direction of travel. The battalion translator, the *only* translator for a unit of approximately 800 men, indicates that the civilians are indeed fleeing the men in

pickups, revealed now to be Fedayeen death squads loyal to Saddam. Despite efforts to treat and provide aid to the injured and exhausted Iraqis, the battalion commander, a Colonel referred to almost exclusively by his call-sign of “Godfather,” orders that the battalion move on, orders apparently conveyed to him by the Division commander. This, as multiple characters acknowledge, leaves the civilians with only one option: to walk back in the direction they came, towards the death squads. As the Marines reload into their vehicles and watch the Iraqis begin to shamle away, a Navy Corpsman named Bryan remarks: “Our first interaction with Iraqi civilians, and we fuck ‘em.” (Burns & Simon 2007) Despite the burden of care imposed by the Geneva conventions, and the Marines’ own perceived goals of aiding and liberating the Iraqi people, their only recourse is to abandon those they had hoped to help to their apparent deaths.

If *The Outpost* elides critique of American imperialism by presenting Afghans as threatening, *Generation Kill* condemns it explicitly by presenting Americans as idiots. Despite First Recon’s (admittedly well-deserved) reputation as an elite, highly-trained, and tightly directed reconnaissance force, many of its officers are shown to be incompetent. Hitman’s commander (here called Hitman-1 to distinguish from the company callsign) frequently fails to make critical decisions or makes the wrong ones altogether, at one point nearly shelling his own troops despite information contradicting his assumptions. The commander of Lt. Fick’s sister platoon, call-signed Hitman-3, is panicky and mentally unstable. He continually demonstrates morally reprehensible or outright illicit behavior, whether in torturing prisoners, attempting to murder surrendering personnel, or taking trophies from dead Iraqis. Despite this, neither Hitman-1 nor Hitman-3 are ever reprimanded or punished for their behavior. (Burns & Simon 2007) In

this and in countless other instances, *Generation Kill* puts the lie to the ideas of military professionalism, honorable conduct in war, or justified killing. There can be no professionalism where there is no accountability. There can be no honorable conduct where individual action is so strongly constrained. And most importantly, there can be no justified killing, even in self-defense, where our very presence is unjustifiable.

Captain America: Winter Soldier

Unlike *The Outpost* and *Generation Kill*, *Captain America: Winter Soldier* does not exist in reference to a particular war. The events of the film are fictional, and the fantastical, super-powered nature of protagonists and antagonists alike ensure that, while its world resembles our own, it exists distinct from the course of our own history. This does not, however, mean that *Winter Soldier* as media exists outside of the scope of the same cultural influences that have shaped media directly related to the Global War on Terror. Though *Winter Soldier* is not strictly war media, at least not in the way that *Outpost* and *Generation Kill* are, its characters, themes, and overarching plot are heavily influenced by the United States' orientation towards its military, particularly in the era of counterterrorism. This is especially salient given that the titular character, Captain America himself, is broadly conceptualized as the ideal American soldier. Both within and without the continuity of the film, Captain America acts as a totem of symbolic representation, both for the American military and for the United States more generally. Thus, how *Winter Soldier* orients the audience both to Cap and his enemies bears close examination.

Captain America: Winter Soldier follows, as one might imagine, Captain America, real name Steve Rogers, who has only recently re-entered the modern world

after an extended period of cryo-hibernation. Rogers was initially chosen as part of a super-soldier program during World War II. After receiving genetic enhancements granting superhuman strength, agility, and endurance, Cap wound up frozen in an ice floe, only awakening more than sixty years later as a 20th century soldier in a 21st century world. *Winter Soldier* follows Rogers and his companions, Black Widow and the Falcon, as they fight to prevent a wide-scale pre-emptive extermination campaign, carried out by a Nazi-tangential authoritarian group known as HYDRA. Rogers and his compatriots come to discover that HYDRA have extensively infiltrated SHIELD, the defense agency under which Cap and Black Widow operate, and plan to kill anyone who might pose a threat to total HYDRA control using a series of interlinked, semi-autonomous flying aircraft carriers, originally designed and created for SHIELD itself. While the carriers are destroyed and HYDRA's genocidal plans ultimately stopped, Captain America and his allies are forced to confront the extent of SHIELD's infiltration by HYDRA, concluding that the only solution consists in destroying SHIELD altogether. (Russo & Russo 2014)

Winter Soldier is particularly interesting for my own analysis, both in how it echoes and subverts the language of modern counterterrorism. In positioning Cap himself against hyper-drone wielding cyberpunk Nazis, the film evokes identification with Rogers and his allies through connections to nostalgia. Captain America is acknowledged within the film to be a remnant of the Second World War, a period that the narrative treats as a simpler time of clear divisions between good and evil. HYDRA, the cyber-Nazi group responsible for infiltrating SHIELD, were Rogers' primary antagonists during his WWII service. Thus, their reemergence into the plot once again positions Captain America as the idealized Good American fighting against an unequivocal evil. While this

framing strongly mirrors existing cultural understandings of America's role in World War II, HYDRA's conflation with the images of drone and aircraft carrier suggests a degree of skepticism towards the contemporary conduct of America's wars. However, while Rogers and his allies conclude that SHIELD and its initiatives need to be destroyed alongside HYDRA, Captain America's own role within these structures remains largely unquestioned. *Winter Soldier* ultimately seems to hold that the solution to a bad American with a gun is a good American with a gun (or shield, as it were). If Steve Rogers exists to embody a particular time and type of American military intervention, *Winter Soldier's* narrative framing presents the solution to problems of American imperialism as a return to the clear-cut, ostensibly morally grounded military actions of the Second World War. Unfortunately, I do not believe such a regression can be maintained, if only because *Winter Soldier* invokes nostalgia for a particular vision of American history through the image of a man who bears little meaningful resemblance to how that same history took place.

CHAPTER TWO

The Outpost: Soldiers-as-Totems

Production and Basis of Analysis

In October of 2013, then-ABC White House correspondent Jake Tapper published *The Outpost: An Untold Story of American Valor*, a journalistic account of the battle of Kamdesh in 2009, one of the largest and deadliest engagements of the (then) 8-year war in Afghanistan. In an interview with NPR's Terry Gross, Tapper described the genesis of his interest in Kamdesh. As he sat in a hospital room a day after his son's birth, Tapper "caught this TV report about the attack on Combat Outpost Keating... and it was just a gripping story, and most poignant for me was... holding my son and hearing about eight other sons taken from this world." (*Fresh Air* 2013) Though not present during the events of the battle, Tapper was driven by his emotional response to learn more about Kamdesh. Tapper sought to convey both the strategic and situational difficulties facing the Americans, as well as the stories of the dead and survivors alike. *The Outpost* is the culmination of those efforts, and purports to tell the full story of Combat Outpost (COP) Keating "from its establishment to eventual destruction," through the eyes of those who lived it. (Amazon)

By 2018, Universal Pictures had acquired the rights to Tapper's book and was in plans to produce an adaptation of the battle based on Tapper's account. (Siegel 2018) Tapper himself expressed support for the adaptation, stating, "We can never fully repay the troops and their families, but the fact that millions more Americans will soon learn

their inspiring story will hopefully convey to these patriots an even greater and deeper sense of appreciation.” (Siegel 2018) *The Outpost*, sharing a title with Tapper’s book, was initially screened in October of 2019 for veterans of the battle and their families in Washington D.C. before receiving a limited theatre and full streaming release on July 3rd, 2020. (Lurie 2020) Veterans’ reception of the film was reportedly positive. Stoney Portis, commander of Bravo Troop, 3-61 CAV (3rd Squadron, 61st Cavalry regiment, the unit followed throughout the film and one of those followed in the book) stated that “by allowing soldiers to tell their story, by hearing their story, you are also part of the healing.” (Lurie 2020) Similar praise came from Navy SEAL Dr. Dan Barkhuff, who characterized the film as “the best war movie since Black Hawk Down, maybe better.” (Lurie 2020) In its literary and filmic origins, as well as early reception to the film itself, *The Outpost* demonstrates a commitment to showing the events of Kamdesh through the lived experiences of those present during the battle. I argue that this commitment, whatever its positives, also produces a rhetorical framing of the War in Afghanistan that elides meaningful critique by de-centering the experiences of Afghans, rhetorically confining them and thus rendering their lives meaningless.

A commitment to conveying the lived experiences of soldiers is certainly admirable in some respect when taken in isolation. As Sarah Maltby and Katy Parry examine in “Contemporary soldiering, self-representation and popular culture,” personalized media forms such as social networking “may have helped military-media operations when it comes to empathizing with soldiers, veterans, and their families,” by grounding the experiences of military personnel in the language of broader cultural touchstones. (2016) Videos of US Marines lip-syncing Carly Rae Jepsen’s *Call Me*

Maybe or web blogs from the front lines “are conducive to establishing common ground with civilian audiences,” thereby providing a basis for empathy and understanding. (Maltby & Parry 2016) However, this experiential inclusivity is not total. The same processes that work to identify civilians with military personnel abroad “also work to define the servicemen as a social collective against outsider groups,” a simultaneous practice of openness and exclusion that places civilian identification with military service outside the scope of military life itself. (Maltby & Parry 2016) While the public performance of soldiering opens spaces for empathy and shared ideological commitment, it delineates that space by way of an apoliticized (or depoliticized) framing of conflict and military service which the public is called to support, but not to question. This delineation, however, is not total.

While images of soldiering are generally cast as empathetic but distant, this frame is complicated when previously hidden aspects of military service are brought to light. Images released from Abu Ghraib prison, a coalition-run detention site in the early stages of the Iraq war, showed Iraqi detainees being tortured and sexually abused by posed, smiling American soldiers. The performative aspect of these photos is especially salient, as it hints that they were not objects of shame, but rather “[suggest] a sense of pride or even enjoyment at committing the abusive acts captured.” (Smith & Dionisopoulous 2008) Counter to the positively valenced depictions that Parry and Maltby examine, images from Abu Ghraib *did* provide a site for questioning military conduct. The fact that American soldiers seemed to revel in such abhorrent acts prompted critics to challenge the dichotomous frame of the war in Iraq as a struggle between good and evil (Smith & Dionisopoulous 2008), reappropriate these images as anti-war symbols (Nathan 2011),

and question underlying cultures of commemorative violence that produced these images to begin with. (Jakob 2017) We see then that the public performance of soldiering does not entirely close off space for war criticism, particularly when the manifestations of that performance do not align with broadly conceived ideological commitments.

This is especially relevant to my own analysis, as *The Outpost*'s origins as a film are steeped, at least nominally, in critique of the United States' military conduct in Afghanistan. Both the film and the book upon which it is based go to great lengths to establish the tactical and strategic tenuousness of COP Keating. The outpost itself was positioned at the base of a valley in the Hindu Kush mountains, providing Taliban fighters with unobstructed, elevated firing positions. Dialogue between soldiers repeatedly emphasizes the absurdity of COP Keating's position and the apparent apathy of distant, highly placed officers. The book and film continually center the discontent of individual soldiers with the situation at Keating, and their anxieties surrounding relations with Afghan locals. Both frame the eventual Taliban assault as arising at least in part from what Tapper describes as "the deep-rooted inertia of military thinking," or more simply the failure of military officials to adequately address conditions on the ground. (*Fresh Air* 2013) Critiques of war will necessarily entail critiques of how they are conducted, and *The Outpost* is no exception. There is an understandable desire, particularly in the aftermath of a conflict, to explain what went wrong in terms of what should have been done. Such interests are compounded by the need for governments and families alike to justify the losses of life that war demands. However, such explications often trend towards historical revisionism to suggest that it was not the war itself, but the way the war was prosecuted which was problematic. Post-WWII treatments of the

Eastern front by German generals have produced a mythology of the conflict which holds that, but for the failings of German military leadership, the war could have been conducted and won cleanly. (Smelser & Davies 2008) This kind of “lost cause” mythologizing is not limited to WWII; it has remained especially pervasive in the United States regarding the Civil War and Vietnam War, and broadly serves to reinstall hegemonic understandings of war’s necessity, even as it nominally criticizes the war itself.

The Outpost participates in the same revisionist processes by centering the lived experiences of 3-61 CAV to such an extent that, while the existence of COP Keating itself is called into question, the United States military’s presence in Afghanistan is not. Just as *Captain America: Winter Soldier* filters the necessity of military intervention through cultural nostalgia for the Second World War, *The Outpost* draws upon existing ideographic orientations towards depictions of soldiers in combat gear to valence the act of soldiering through positive collective commitments invoked by those depictions: we should honor the dead and defend liberty just as soldiers themselves do. Simultaneously, *The Outpost* denies physical presence and rhetorical agency to Afghans, a framing which inextricably associates them with the Taliban as an understood enemy Other. In doing so, *The Outpost* obfuscates meaningful critique of the Global War on Terror and American imperialism more broadly by centering the soldier-self as an ideograph of support for the American military and rhetorically containing the lives of Afghans, thereby rendering their deaths un-grievable and justified. Though nominally critical of how our wars are conducted, *The Outpost* maintains a framing in which these wars are nonetheless necessary.

The Soldier-Self as Visual Ideograph

I propose that within *The Outpost*, American service personnel, particularly US Army soldiers, function as a visual ideograph of support for the military. This framing casts infantry in combat gear, or “battle rattle,” as a physicalized embodiment of the coda “support our troops.” Michael Calvin McGee, in “The ‘Ideograph’: A link Between Rhetoric and Ideology,” conceives of ideographs as “one-term sums of an orientation, the species of ‘God’ or ‘Ultimate’ term that will be used to symbolize the line of argument the meanest sort of individual *would* [emphasis in original] pursue... as a defense of a personal stake in and commitment to the society.” (McGee 1980) Ideographs exist as the constituent components of ideology, which in turn acts as “a *rhetoric* [emphasis in original] of control, a system of persuasion presumed to be effective on the whole community.” (McGee 1980) Ideographs are not truth-propositions in themselves, but function as such within the ideology that they constitute by generating a series of common usages whose meaning is understood *a priori*. Thus, terms like “rule of law,” “liberty,” and “freedom of speech” are understood to signify an ideological commitment within a given cultural-linguistic frame, representations of “a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal.” (McGee 1980) Ideographs function as a form of constitutive rhetoric (Charland 1989) for those who buy in to their meanings by orienting audiences around the same ideological call to action. Within *The Outpost*, this call-to-action manifests as a commitment to memorialize the actions and deaths of American soldiers in Afghanistan as part of a tragic yet necessary defense of American values and interests.

Part and parcel of this understood meaning is a level of cultural embeddedness; ideographs are not intelligible apart from the cultural consciousness that they constitute. The same language of common usages that unite ideologies simultaneously “*separates* [emphasis in original] us from other human beings who do not accept our meanings, our intentions.” (McGee 1980) Thus, while both the Taliban and United States may have independent conceptions of God-terms like “common good” and “liberation,” the two parties’ understandings of these terms are not mutually intelligible. *The Outpost* participates in the shared ideographic understanding of combat troops by visually and narratively positioning its characters as microcosms of the United States military. Audience understanding of the War in Afghanistan is filtered through a culturally-mediated understanding of the role of soldiers that places them in service of positive collective commitments: freeing Afghans, combatting terrorists, and defending Americans from amorphous yet omnipresent threats.

It is important to note that, as a film, *The Outpost* relies heavily on visual rather than written or spoken language in its rhetorical function. We understand soldiers as component parts of the military, and thus of militarism as ideology, through visual markers that distinguish them from the broader whole. Janis L. Edwards and Carol K. Winkler expand upon McGee’s concept of ideograph by extending its depictive power to images and their reiterations. In “Representative Form and the Visual Ideograph,” Edwards and Winkler examine the famous image of US marines raising the American flag over Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima as “an instance of depictive rhetoric that functions ideographically.” (Edwards & Winkler 1997) By adopting the representative form, if not the content of the image (presidential candidates in place of the marines, the roof of the

Supreme Court building instead of Mt. Suribachi), reiterations of the flag-raising “represent collective commitment to normative goals that transcend the military environment.” (Edwards & Winkler 1997) The image, though still dependent on cultural embeddedness for its understood meaning, is abstracted to represent ideological commitments beyond its original scope. Thus, depictions of soldiers in combat gear do not merely speak to a particular war or iteration of the military. Rather, combat-equipped soldiers serve as cross-generational markers of the same collective commitments, a function cleanly demonstrated in the U.S. Army’s 2019 commemoration of the assault on Pointe du Hoc during D-Day. By having modernly equipped Army Ranger personnel climb the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc alongside Rangers dressed in WWII equipment (U.S. Army 2019), the Army itself suggests a continuity of purpose that transcends the material circumstances of any given war. Similarly, depictions of combat infantry in *The Outpost* speak not only to the reality of the War in Afghanistan, but to the understood ideological commitments of the American military throughout history.

Central to my own construction of infantry-as-ideograph is the concept of the soldier-self, a framing common to war film that positions the soldier as the sole point of narrative intelligibility. Holger Pötzsch argues that war films such as Ridley Scott’s *Black Hawk Down* enact epistemological barriers around the subject position that invite “not only recognition, but also alignment and allegiance,” primarily through granting soldiers a multiplicity of identities. (Pötzsch 2011) Expository scenes, the oft-repeated anecdotes and phone calls from home, expand the boundaries of the soldier-self and provide space for the audience to empathize with military personnel. This empathetic framing is nonetheless delimited by the discursive framing of enemies as “ubiquitously

absent—hidden, inaccessible, incomprehensible yet potentially omnipresent as a deadly threat,” which in turn defines the soldier-self through opposition. (Pötzsch 2011) The violence that soldiers, and military personnel more broadly, enact is justified by the construction of their enemies as faceless and existentially threatening, thereby rendering their deaths at the hands of Americans as justifiable and ungrievable. *The Outpost* adopts the framing of the soldier-self virtually unquestioned; the events of the film are only ever seen through the eyes of American soldiers. When combined with the collective commitments to militarism embodied within soldiers themselves, the soldier-self suggests that the soldier’s understanding of warfare and their role within it are the *only* valid constructions. The ideograph of combat-equipped infantry thus becomes a lens through which military intervention is only understood through visual languages of existential danger and justified violence, which themselves reify the necessity of military intervention.

The dimensions of this ideographic function are twofold: firstly, images of military personnel, especially infantry in full combat equipment (helmet, rifle, armored vest and ammo carrier), have been so pervasively iterated and reiterated within American culture as to function as visual ideographs in themselves. The ubiquity of such images provides space for empathy with military personnel while simultaneously delimiting their experiences from those of civilians as outlined by Maltby & Parry (2016); all soldiers may be Americans, but they remain visually and culturally distinct from the broader population. Secondly, the understood ideological commitment to support the military is valenced through the rhetorical construction of the soldier-self, which places military personnel as “the unchallenged subject-position within the

dominant discursive frames” of war narratives. (Pötzsch 2011) The outcome of this ideographic framing within *The Outpost* is a construction of the war in Afghanistan that privileges the experiences of American soldiers while denying rhetorical presence or agency to native Afghans, thus rendering both them and the audience incapable of meaningful critique.

How do depictions of American infantry act as visual ideographs? As stated above, images of American service personnel, particularly those in full combat gear, are pervasive throughout American discourse. As Edwards and Winkler argue, the faceless uniformity of the marines in the flag-raising on Mt. Suribachi is a key component of the image’s ideographic function, abstracting the identities of those depicted into “symbolic notions of communal effort, egalitarianism, and patriotism.” (Edwards & Winkler 1997) The actual names of the marines are not important with regard to the image’s representational power. Identically garbed in steel helmets, drab coveralls, and ammunition belts, they can be anyone, and thus allow anyone to transpose themselves onto the same particular yet ill-defined ideological goal: “Support the war.”

This said, the sublimation of identity that images like Iwo Jima enact is equally well suited to dehumanizing those it actually depicts. “The Ballad of Ira Hayes,” an anti-war song by Peter La Farge (though popularized by Johnny Cash) is overtly critical of Hayes’ reduction to an image as one of the men who raised the flag on Mt. Suribachi. The song tells how Ira Hayes, after returning from the war, was driven to alcoholism and depression by the disinterest of a nation which viewed him most usefully as a symbol rather than a man or a Native American:

Ira Hayes returned a hero/Celebrated through the land/He was winned and
speeched and honored/Everybody shook his hand.

But he was just a Pima Indian/No money, no crops, no chance/At home nobody
cared what Ira'd done/And when do Indians dance? (La Farge 1963)

The visual ambiguity that allows any member of the viewing audience to metaphorically put themselves in the soldier's boots simultaneously constructs an understanding of soldiering in which soldiers (or marines) are valuable *only* as soldiers. Despite being part of one of the most iconic images and moments in American military history, Hayes found his own identity sidelined or completely disregarded, a truth-telling for which Johnny Cash's rendition of the song received little promotion or airplay, despite its popularity. (Maloney 2021) This reflects a level of unstated apathy for the wellbeing of soldiers-as-individuals: if we honor military personnel for the sufferings they undertake, we simultaneously accept these sufferings as necessary. This enables depictions of infantry such as those within *The Outpost* to place individual deaths within the scope of a greater ideological commitment that renders their identity beyond the soldier-self as a point of honorific sympathy, but not of criticism; it is a tragedy that soldiers die, but that is what soldiers are there to do.

The same visual-ideographic functions served by the marines in the flag-raising photo are reiterated in the Korean War Veterans Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., though the ideological commitment that these images represent is valenced somewhat differently. The memorial consists of four components: two engraved granite walls, a reflecting pool, and a series of 19 statues of American infantrymen. The statues in particular embody the same visual ambiguity present in the flag-raising and are described as "an ethnic cross section of America," exemplifying the diversity of those who served in Korea. (The Memorial) The party itself includes members of the four main combat branches of the military (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines), however the lack

of visual distinctiveness between the personnel depicted is such that individual identification is difficult to the casual observer. All of the infantrymen are again identically dressed in steel helmets, their bodies largely obscured by ponchos that render them nearly indistinguishable in form. The only meaningful differentiation is in their equipment. Some carry rifles, others lug support weapons like machineguns and rocket launchers. The Army medic and Navy Corpsman are weaponless, identifiable by the crosses on their helmets, while the Air Force combat controller carries the squad's radio kit. (The Memorial) Their distinctiveness exists not in their identity as Americans, but in their role within the military; their identity is inseparable from and again immaterial to their soldier-self.

Simultaneously, the infantry in the Memorial gain their individuality (to those who understand) through their equipment, a mechanism of differentiation that grounds them firmly outside of the civilian experience. Most civilians will not recognize the difference in role between a soldier carrying an M1 carbine and a marine carrying a machinegun. For those fully embodied in the soldier-self however (or merely those with an unhealthy interest in military equipment), such relatively minute distinctions provide space for identification beyond the broader cultural scope. From the outside looking in, the soldier-self manifests as an abstracted subset of American culture grounded in sacrifice and mutual commitment. From the inside looking out, the soldier-self becomes a culture of its own, with its attendant subgroups and marks of differentiation.

The Korean War Veterans Memorial, like the flag-raising on Iwo Jima, centers the soldier-self through ambiguous representations of American military personnel that, in this case, direct a commitment to "Honor the fallen," a commitment made explicit by

the epitaph engraved on one of the neighboring granite walls: “Freedom isn’t free.” (The Memorial) Though not faceless, the infantry depicted in the memorial again stand not for any one squad or platoon in particular, but for any American willing to transpose themselves into their boots. The Memorial also represents the same potential for dehumanization present in the Iwo Jima image. The slogan “Freedom isn’t free” suggests that every life lost in the Korean War was lost in service of securing freedom, an ideological commitment that again casts soldiers’ deaths as grievable but necessary. *The Outpost* reiterates this framing in scenes that mention or overtly memorialize dead members of 3-61 CAV. Though largely spoken of in passing, these fallen soldiers serve as disembodied reminders of what soldiers must be willing to sacrifice, a metaphorical (and within the film, literal) memorial wall that subsumes the individual into the soldier-self as a sacrificial object rather than a person.

Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* is particularly illustrative here. The film’s release poster consists simply of plain block text on a white background surrounding a picture of a steel helmet, the same M1 helmet used by service personnel in World War II and Korea. However, unlike the undistinguished steel pots of the Mt. Suribachi photo and the Korean War memorial, the poster helmet is decorated with a peace button and the phrase “Born to Kill” written in marker, as well as a small ammunition belt tucked into the helmet’s webbing. (Kubrick 1987) The helmet, and military equipment more generally, again stand as a visual representation of the soldier-self, an ideograph signaling military service as a distinguishing marker from the cultural whole. However, unlike the previous contexts, the helmet is distinctly personalized. Someone, some individual, pinned on the button and stenciled the slogan. The resulting image expresses a conflation

of individual and collective identity that only allows the former to be articulated through the latter.

This representational sublimation, in which the *only* identity that military personnel possess lies in the soldier-self, is central to *Full Metal Jacket*'s broader critique. The marines in the film, from their first day at Parris Island to their eventual deployments in Vietnam, are almost never referred to by their given names. They instead have names imposed upon them, particularly by the notorious Drill Sergeant, Hartman. Individuals become monikers: "Joker," "Cowboy," "Animal Mother," and "8-Ball," just to name a few. (Kubrick 1987) Moreover, *Full Metal Jacket* frames this erasure of individuality not as incidental, but foundational to the culture underlying military service. Marines are not valuable as individuals, but as marines alone, and thus must be disabused of any extraneous identity. Sgt. Hartman articulates the point quite nicely in his farewell speech to the recruits: "Marines die. That's what we're here for. But the Marine Corps lives forever." (Kubrick 1987) Thus, as Edwards and Winkler examine, the ideograph of infantry in combat gear is re-valenced once again, not as a referent of honored sacrifice but of wide-scale, mass-produced dehumanization.

This circles us back to my own object of analysis, the ideographic function of the infantryman in *The Outpost*. I argue that representations of infantry in *The Outpost* are much more ideologically similar to their manifestations in the Iwo Jima image and the Korean War memorial than they are to *Full Metal Jacket*, with the caveat that infantry in *The Outpost* are explicitly distinguished as individuals. The infantry of 3-61 CAV are identified first and foremost with the soldier-self, both visually (through the ideograph of the infantryman as examined above) and narratively (the action of the film barely extends

beyond COP Keating itself, and never beyond the scope of a combat deployment).

However, unlike Iwo Jima and the Memorial, *The Outpost* provides explicit space for soldiers to exist as individuals beyond their role in the military, a mode of identification that, while secondary to the soldier-self, directs a commitment to mourn the loss of the individual while honoring their sacrifice as soldiers.

The Soldier-Self in The Outpost

Jake Tapper envisioned *The Outpost* as a chronicle of life at COP Keating through the eyes of the soldiers stationed there. The film exercises the same commitment through strict visual language that both rhetorically and materially confines the scope of the Afghanistan war to the barbed wire and sandbag barriers of the outpost itself, a confinement that erases the rhetorical and physical presence of Afghans. The film opens (after some establishing expository text) with helicopters conveying fresh troops to the outpost, at that point dubbed PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team) Kamdesh [AN: though the outpost was referred to as PRT Kamdesh for a time after its founding, I will be primarily referring to it by its final operational name, COP Keating]. Inside a transport helicopter we are introduced to a handful of our primary characters, each dressed and equipped more or less identically in the same Kevlar helmets, load-bearing armored vests, and camouflaged fatigues. The ideograph of the infantryman once again presents itself as a shared mode of in-group identification, establishing these men as both part of a unit and a larger military whole.

The Outpost's opening scene also reflects a conflation between personal and professional identities that erases, or at the least sidelines the existence of soldiers beyond the military; the soldier-self is deliberately conflated and contrasted with the identities of

soldiers-as-civilians. During the initial flight to the outpost, one of the soldiers, Sgt. Michael Scusa, expresses anxiety about his wife's mental wellbeing with him on deployment. The soldier sitting next to him, Staff Sgt. Justin Gallegos, advises Scusa to be like Staff Sgt. Clinton Romesha, also seated nearby. Romesha, or Ro, sums up his view succinctly: "I'll call home when I'm on a bird [helicopter] out of this valley. Until then, don't think about your wives." (Lurie, 2020) Though the film deliberately establishes the existence of an identity outside the scope of the military, it equally deliberately sidelines it as immaterial, or even harmful to life at the outpost. The soldier-self is the only self that can meaningfully survive in Afghanistan.

The sublimation of secondary identities in *The Outpost* is not total, however. Soldiers are provided space for identification with their civilian-selves in part to reinforce the necessity of their role in the military. In *Troubling Masculinities: Terror, Gender, and Monstrous Others*, Glenn Donnar examines how depictions of conflict and terroristic destruction in the 2007 film *The Kingdom* work to reinforce a particular form of performatively violent masculinity as a culturally redemptive response for Americans post-9/11. Within counterterrorist action films such as *The Kingdom* (Berg 2007), this is accomplished in part by visual language that defines characters first by their professional role, "a specific structuring device for masculinity in *The Kingdom* and many frontier westerns," (Donnar 2020) that discursively links the professional and paternal, or perhaps civilian, self. Though the "father-self" so to speak is present, it can only be expressed and enacted through "protective masculinity" by way of violence against the Other. (Donnar 2020) Dual identification with soldier and civilian-selves is not intended to distinguish the individual from their role-as-soldier, nor even to expand the personal scope of

individual soldiers. Rather, secondary modes of identification cast soldiering as a performative defense of the civilian-self. *The Outpost* adopts this framing most clearly in its depictions of soldiers calling their families back home. During one such call set just before the massed Taliban attack, Staff Sgt. Ty Carter explains to his daughter what he perceives as his role in Afghanistan: “When you watch the news, you see bad people doing bad things to good people like you and mommy? It’s my job to take care of the bad guys... To find them and to kill them, sweetie.” (Lurie 2020) SSgt. Carter very explicitly defines his job, and consequently the job of all soldiers in *The Outpost*, in terms of enacting violence outwardly against “bad guys” with the goal of directly protecting his child and her mother.

The Outpost continually centers the soldier-self as the subject position of its action through the same kind of in-group differentiation reflected in *Full Metal Jacket* and the Korean War Veterans Memorial. Identification between individual soldiers in *The Outpost* is less a matter of their background as Americans and more of their role within 3-61 CAV itself. The outpost’s mortar crew, nicknamed “mortaritaville,” is regarded as an essential component of COP Keating’s defensive strategy, a source of competition and friendly teasing between them and the rest of the unit. Non-commissioned officers (NCOs) like Romesha and Gallegos form another sub-group, interacting with one another more casually and openly than they do with regular enlisted men. As in the Korean War Memorial, soldiers in *The Outpost* are identified first with the military as a whole, and differentiated by their positioning within this discursive frame as a mortarman, a team leader, a machine-gunner, a rifleman.

The bonds between individual soldiers, and more broadly the unity and cohesion of the outfit as a whole, are central to how *The Outpost* constructs audience understanding of war and military service. This is evident within the film itself as well as in reactions to it. The National Medal of Honor Museum, an organization overtly dedicated to honoring an idealized conception of soldiering, praises *The Outpost* for “capturing the salty banter of combat soldiers far from home... men from different parts of the United States and from different ethnic groups banding together, in the face of great dangers, to form the type of bonds that will drive their selfless acts in support of one another.” (National Medal of Honor Museum) Reflected in this praise are strains of the same in-group identification that Maltby and Parry (2016) outline; it is noteworthy that the Museum’s appraisal of *The Outpost* makes no mention of ideological war-aims, or even protecting the homeland. Rather, the relationships between individual soldiers provide the emotional, rather than political backdrop against which the audience’s understanding of soldiering can be built.

A common thread throughout depictions of war, *The Outpost* included, is an emphasis on close emotional relationships between soldiers as their reason to fight, in place of ideological or even strictly military motivations. Such orientations are not limited to the War on Terror, nor are they merely a convenient screenwriting trope. Close relationships between soldiers in combat form an essential component of war’s psychology, both during and after service. Joseph Kearns Goodwin, reflecting on his own experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, asserts that “Relationships forged under fire cannot be easily recreated in the modern world or even understood by anyone who has not been in combat.” (2020) In Goodwin’s view, post-traumatic stress disorder and isolation from

civilian life stem in part from the loss of camaraderie and sense of purpose that combat relationships provide. Though it only addresses post-deployment life obliquely, *The Outpost* reinforces this orientation through the relationships it showcases. Soldiers that have shared combat with one another are the most emotionally close, and those that sit outside of this bond are either inducted into it through violence, or excluded from the soldier-self, as we will examine further on.

The other, uglier component of this dynamic is the role these bonds play in orienting and in some sense justifying war's violence. Sebastian Junger in War, his account of another combat deployment in Afghanistan, articulates how friendships between soldiers provide a rationale for killing the Other: "You're thinking that this guy could have murdered your friend... people think we were cheering because we just shot someone but we were cheering because we just stopped someone from killing us." (Junger 2010 in Goodwin 2020) The shared threat of death in combat dually functions as a catalyst of in-group identification and the means by which this identification is oriented against the enemy. Performative violence against the Other is cast as self-preservation, with all members of the unit embodied into the same soldier-self through bonds formed under threat.

Thus far we have largely discussed the emotional dimensions of embodiment in the soldier-self, primarily through orientations towards fellow soldiers and the civilian world. This analysis began, however, with the assertion that these affective aspects are unified most clearly in the visual image of soldiers-as-ideographs. Soldiers in *The Outpost* are very rarely seen out of full combat gear, and never out of some manner of uniform. This is in part thanks to the strategic positioning of COP Keating, as the

surrounding mountains of the Hindu Kush provided Taliban militants with unobstructed and well-concealed firing positions. The men of 3-61 CAV are forced to contend with daily rifle, machine gun, and mortar attacks, lending a perpetual sense of danger to life at the outpost and necessitating constant combat readiness. Though at least in some sense incidental to the conditions depicted, the omnipresence of helmet, armored vest, and rifle maintains the ideographic framing of soldiers as universalized, sacrificial objects. Members of 3-61 CAV are individually identified and distinguished both by their role within the unit and their identity as Americans. Satellite calls home and wistful references to families and past jobs remind the audience that soldiers do not spring forth fully-formed from the gates of Ft. Benning, but are otherwise ordinary Americans who have adopted the soldier-self. Frequently, however, these interludes are juxtaposed with or interrupted by firefights. Sgt. Scusa, ostensibly speaking to his wife back in the States, is forced to drop the phone and pick up his rifle to suppress incoming Taliban fire. (Lurie 2020) Scusa must, quite literally, discard his civilian-self once the bullets start flying.

The frequency and unpredictability of violence in *The Outpost* grounds audience understanding of the soldier-self in a visual and narrative language of perpetual danger. Such framings are common to frontier westerns and their various iterations, which invoke “a profound, unresolved tension and contrast between secure and insecure, American and foreign.” (Donnar 2020) Within this space, frontier heroes engage in a perpetual struggle to secure the borders of civilization both emotionally and physically.

The boundaries of COP Keating represent the borders of American space for the soldiers of 3-61 CAV, borders enforced by violence against the Taliban who threaten them as well as co-identification with the community of the outpost. COP Keating, for all

of its dangers, provides soldiers with their only links to home and civilized comfort, whether through the ubiquitous satellite calls, intermittently-working internet, or the underwear of a Russian tennis star. (Lurie 2020) The perpetual presence of the Taliban, however, casts COP Keating as a slice of America isolated and under constant existential threat. At any given moment, any member of the troop must be ready for their home to turn into a battlefield, and as a result must always be properly equipped to meet the threat. The visual ideograph of infantry as a shared identifier emerges as much from the context of the image within broader cultural understanding of the military as it does from the bare necessities of war. As Holger Pötzsch (2011) argues, the subject position of the soldier-self is one defined by the ambiguous yet omnipresent threat of the Other. Though we will examine exactly how *The Outpost* frames these Others in a later section, suffice to say for now that images of soldiers in combat gear within the film cannot be separated from the soldier-self as embodied in shared identification built upon perpetual danger and performative violence.

Taken together, the above elements embed the representative form of combat-equipped infantry in a conception of the soldier-self that acknowledges their individuality as Americans while centering lived experiences of danger so extensively that other means of identification or scopes of examination are obscured or obliterated outright. In doing so, *The Outpost* positions COP Keating as a microcosm of the War on Terror, a war in which the enemy is rarely visible but always present, rendering survival as the only clear victory condition. All members of 3-61 CAV possess a civilian-self, and the film provides no shortage of opportunities for individual soldiers to express these identities. As the film's climactic attack makes clear, however, such identities can only be

secondary to their self-as-soldier. When the Taliban finally mass their offensive against COP Keating, the soldier-self becomes the only self, and any who embody it can be suddenly and violently killed. The framing of soldiers as sacrificial totems is complete.

Though heavily foreshadowed throughout the film, the climactic Taliban attack on COP Keating is primarily framed as simply another iteration of the violence the men of 3-61, and thus all those embodied in the soldier-self, must contend with. As the battle begins with a sudden burst of incoming mortar fire, one soldier rushes to his position while muttering, “Just another fucking day in Afghanistan.” (Lurie 2020) Other soldiers, quickly realizing the scale of the problem, spring into action, grabbing weapons and equipment in various stages of undress. By the time the attack comes, only those soldiers explicitly and fully embodied in the soldier-self remain, a delineation we will discuss in detail in the next section. Suffice to say for now, *The Outpost*’s depiction of the Battle of Kamdesh firmly centers the soldier-as-ideograph by modeling the ideal behaviors of a soldier under fire. The troops of 3-61 are certainly scared when the attack comes; many show visible fear or panic outright. Despite this, none even comes close to dereliction of duty. All of the American soldiers at Keating perform their ordained tasks without hesitation, and many are shown being killed in attempts to save fellow soldiers or otherwise support the battle.

The hour of the film leading up to the Taliban attack, as discussed above, utilizes references to life outside of soldiering to embed the audience in sympathy and identification with soldiers. Once the attack begins, these anecdotes fade into the background as another element of the backdrop against which soldiering is performed; every time a soldier is killed, their uniform-clad corpse becomes an ideographic marker

of war's cost. Not only a soldier, but a father, or son, or brother has died. For those members of 3-61 fully embodied in the soldier-self, the Battle of Kamdesh defines their actions as laudable, but not necessarily extraordinary. If soldiers in *The Outpost* serve as an ideographic stand-in for the military as a whole, then the collective commitment they represent suggests that the role-as-soldier often necessitates the sacrifice, both emotionally and materially, of the civilian-self.

Outside the Soldier-Self: PFC Yunger and Capt. Broward

To this point we have largely focused on defining the soldier-self and its ideographic function by examining the qualities positively embodied with them: duty, sacrifice, and honor against the backdrop of existential threat. Also present in *The Outpost*, albeit less explicitly, is a distinction between the kinds of soldier that can be fully embodied in the soldier-self. One of the characters introduced on the flight into Keating is Private First-Class Zorias Yunger, a soldier on his first deployment who is continually (and at least semi-derogatorily) referred to as “Cherry,” an epithet denoting that Yunger has yet to see combat; he hasn’t had his “cherry” popped. The conflation of soldierly identity and virginity once again signals a connection between the professional self and performative masculinity as examined by Donnar. (2020) To be fully embodied in the soldier-self is to have experienced and, to some extent, internalized violence as a path to full, masculine maturity. Yunger lacks this level of experiential identification with the rest of his unit, and as a result stands apart as naïve and often juvenile.

During his first firefight, the morning after his arrival at the outpost, Yunger attracts the ire of SSgt. Gallegos by firing his rifle too closely to the Staff Sergeant’s head. Once the shooting has stopped, Yunger is jubilant, bragging about catching the

action on his video camera. Gallegos, still angry, strides up to Yunger and kicks the young private flat on his back, then leans over closely while grabbing Yunger by his vest. SSgt. Gallegos growls, “You listen to me, Yunger. You ever fucking fire a weapon to me that close again[sic], I’ll fucking kill you myself.” (Lurie 2020) As SSgt. Romesha picks up Yunger and dusts him off, offering cursory words of reassurance, an unidentified soldier crows in the background: “Uh-oh, welcome home, Cherry!” (Lurie 2020). Private Yunger’s first meaningful appearance in *The Outpost* immediately sets him apart from the other men at Keating, even those who arrived at the same time as him. Despite his presence within the soldier-self, marked by his uniform and his participation in combat, Yunger is not sufficiently embodied.

In this and other instances, PFC Yunger is continually distinguished from the other members of his unit, even other so-called “cherries,” by his inexperience and apparent inability to fully adopt the soldier-self. In a later scene, while on patrol with other members of 3-61, Yunger attempts to bond with SSgt. Vernon Martin, the troop’s mechanic and another experienced NCO. Yunger’s efforts are cut short when, after a series of pithy comparisons invoking a “band of brothers,” Yunger (who is white) blithely calls SSgt. Martin (the only Black man present and one of only two Black men in the film given a speaking role) the n-word. Martin’s response is immediate and, as one might imagine, unfavorable. Like SSgt. Gallegos, Martin threatens violence against the private, a threat only cut short by the unit’s leader, Captain Rob Yllescas, who states, “All right, knock it off! You got my blessing to kick his Whiskey Tango [NATO phonetic alphabet-slang for white trash] ass when we get back [to Keating].” (Lurie, 2020) Once again, Yunger has stepped outside of his role-as-soldier and been met with threats. While

wearing the uniform and being present on the battlefield are necessary preconditions for entering into the soldier-self, they are not sufficient on their own to constitute embodiment within it. Yunger and all of the other soldiers on patrol are fully equipped and thus participate in the ideographic function of infantry visually, a participation that Yunger tries to extend by insulting SSgt. Martin (ostensibly in good humor). However, as Martin's response demonstrates, the kind of racially-embedded masculinist posturing that PFC Yunger attempts is available only to those already embedded in the soldier-self, uniform or not.

Interestingly, SSgt. Martin's anger at Yunger is framed as not solely stemming from Yunger's use of a racial slur. Racially-charged humor is prevalent among members of 3-61 CAV, particularly with SSgt. Gallegos as a target. The difference lies in Yunger's positioning within the soldier-self, though it should be noted that Yunger's is the only explicit usage of a clear racial epithet, at least in reference to fellow soldiers. More intimately bonded members of the troop are able to use racialized humor as a signal of in-group identification. When Specialist Stephan Mace jokes that SSgt. Gallegos (seated next to him in a Humvee) should be the one to drive a large truck, given "that's how he got his whole family across the border," (Lurie 2020), Gallegos' response is notably more lighthearted than SSgt. Martin's. He reaches across and smacks Mace on the back of the helmet, threatening the Specialist in jest: "I could fuck you for that, white boy. But your freaky ass might fall in love." (Lurie, 2020) Among members of 3-61 CAV who share fully in the soldier-self, racial jokes and latent homoeroticism are another manifestation of performative masculinity per Donnar. (2020) This, combined with the visual markers of infantry-as-ideograph (both Mace and Gallegos are in full battle-rattle while seated in

the Humvee), embeds audience understanding of military service within a frame that again regards personal identity, particularly racial identity, as secondary to the duty of the soldier. PCF Yunger errs (beyond the error inherent in using an explicit racial slur) because his naïve, boyish masculinity does not permit full identification with the soldier-self. Other members of 3-61 are able to tease one another in ways not accessible to Yunger because they share in a common identity, forged through shared experiences of violence and reflected in their visual similarity. Any statement which would otherwise threaten the civilian-self can be accepted as a joke because it does not threaten these bonds. Yunger, both through his inexperience and lack of emotional connection to the other soldiers, does not fully participate in this identity, and thus his attempt to bond with SSgt. Martin remains merely an insult.

What is present of Yunger's soldier-self is ultimately destroyed when faced with the reality of the world he inhabits. During the patrol referenced above, Yunger witnesses Captain Yllescas' death by an improvised explosive device (IED) from mere feet away. As the explosion clears, Yunger is shown staring hollow-eyed into the distance, traumatized and covered in the Captain's blood, pulling a piece of Yllescas' brain from his mouth. In the next scene, presumably set the evening after Yllescas' death, Sgt. Romesha finds Yunger huddled in a corner of the barracks, clutching his rifle upright and muttering incoherently about the explosion. Yunger's pose and behavior deliberately emulate well-established visual language of war trauma: he is contemplating suicide. Romesha tries to get Yunger to compose himself by empathizing with the Private, explaining that he knows what Yunger has been through, having seen the same during his time in Iraq. Yunger, however, cannot be brought back to the soldier-self. The unit's

doctor intervenes and the Private is sent away from Keating. (Lurie 2020) Where SSgt. Romesha and other members of the troop are able to experience and internalize violence as a necessary component of the soldier-self, and thus of life in Afghanistan, Yunger is broken by violence and unable to remain. Though he wears the uniform and carries the gear, Yunger is cast firmly outside the soldier-self by his inexperience and inability to cope with death.

The Outpost and war films in the same vein have a complex relationship with trauma in warfare. Such films, by echoing frontierist orientations towards violence against Others, reinscribe the necessity of warfare, and as a result must also seek to justify or downplay war's lasting effects on the psyche of those who conduct it. Pötzsch's (2011) soldier-self provides a screen of mediation between audiences and depicted enemies, enabling such enemies to be killed without being rendered grievable. (Butler 2009) Soldiers in war films very often reinforce this orientation through language that belittles or otherwise erases the humanity of their enemies, particularly through racialized epithets. Vietnam War films such as *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979), *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick 1987), and *Platoon* (Stone 1989) refer to North Vietnamese forces (NVA and Viet Cong alike) almost exclusively through slurs, a construction of the enemy that *The Outpost* echoes in painting Afghan locals with the pejorative "hajji." (Lurie 2020) The soldier-self thus emerges not only as a protective barrier for the audience, but as an existential framing that inoculates soldiers against the trauma of killing.

Simultaneously, these frames of Othering reorient the trauma of seeing friends and comrades killed around external, rather than internal threats. Soldiers do not die as a result of the structures that send them to war, but solely at the hands of enemies who are

valenced as monsters rather than humans. The blame “is never laid at the hands of men, instead it is always deferred to exterior forces.” (Shaw 2008) This reinforces an understanding of warfare and trauma that centralizes “the wounded body of the white male and the performance of crisis” while minimizing or wholly obscuring the suffering of the actually-marginalized. (Shaw 2008) The implication in this framing is that trauma stems solely from soldiers seeing those who share their embodiment in the soldier-self killed by monsters. This trauma is redeemed (though rarely erased) through the usual process: violence against the Other to protect those who remain. PFC Yunger exists outside of the soldier-self in part because he cannot continue the cycle. Sgt. Romesha begs Yunger: “I got a wife and kids to come home to, and I made them promises. So I need you to make a choice. You gotta get your shit together, or we’re gonna get you out of here.” (Lurie 2020) Yunger, however, cannot remain. He cannot reorient his traumatic experience outward and thus, cannot embody the soldier-self.

Similarly distanced from the dominant conception of soldier-self in *The Outpost* is the third commanding officer of 3-61 CAV shown in the film, Captain Sylvanius Broward. Broward is brought in to replace Captain Yllescas, who within the film is framed as a replacement for Captain Benjamin D. Keating, the outpost’s first commander and the man for whom COP Keating is named in memoriam. [AN: The real Benjamin Keating was a 1st Lieutenant who served at PRT Kamdesh in 2006 with 3-71 CAV of the 10th Mountain Division, and died in November the same year. Curiously, the film places Keating in command of 3-61 CAV, which is part of the 4th Infantry Division, and apparently sets his death after 2007. (Tapper 2012) These temporal and situational alterations are common throughout *The Outpost*, and are likely intended to preserve

narrative clarity.] As a replacement commander for someone who was himself a replacement, Captain Broward is already emotionally distanced from his men. He has not lived through the experiences of 3-61 CAV during their time at Keating and thus stands apart from their soldier-self by default, despite sharing the same visual connection to infantry-as-ideograph. This is especially notable given that, unlike PFC Yunger, Cpt. Broward is a combat-experienced soldier, having served in Iraq previously. It is instead Broward's connection to the Other, the second essential component of the soldier-self, that places him outside of full identification with his men. Captain Broward, unlike the other officers shown commanding COP Keating, is uniquely acquiescent to Afghan demands, a position that the film frames in opposition to the attitudes of his men.

The morning after an attack on COP Keating, the Captain is confronted by a group of Afghan elders at the outpost gates, demanding restitution for a young girl who they claim was killed by American mortars the previous night. Broward does not contest these claims, and flatly orders that the men be paid. One of the NCOs, Sergeant Josh Kirk, protests, denying responsibility for the girl's death and accuses the Afghans of lying to gain money. In the confusion, a nearby dog which Sgt. Scusa has adopted bites one of the Afghans, a grave cultural taboo that the lead elder (and notably, the unit's translator) demands be satisfied. Captain Broward strides over to Scusa and, without a word, pulls out his sidearm, shooting the dog point-blank. An undefined span of time later, Captain Broward walks into the barracks, where his men are waterboarding one another for entertainment, and announces that he has been transferred away from COP Keating. (Lurie, 2020)

That the film narratively conflates Broward's removal from the outpost with his acquiescence to Afghan demands suggests that the soldier-self as conceived within the film is incompatible with a conciliatory approach to dealing with the Other. Both Captains Keating and Yllescas approach relations with Afghan locals punitively, with Keating suggesting the threat of violence for non-cooperation, and Yllescas denying locals material aid. (Lurie 2020) Broward however is characterized primarily by restraint and caution. When the men of 3-61 CAV discover evidence of who killed Captain Yllescas, Broward denies their request to search nearby villages for the man, citing a desire not to aggravate the locals. He frustrates SSgt. Romesha during a firefight by demanding that Ro visually identify enemies before he authorizes mortar support, and later chastises the Staff Sergeant for undue aggressiveness. During this exchange, SSgt. Romesha seems baffled by the Captain's insistence on protocol, snarking "Someone should tell McChrystal (commander of American troops in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal) that we're not selling popsicles out here, sir." (Lurie 2020) To Romesha and the rest of 3-61 CAV, Captain Broward's lack of aggressiveness towards Afghan locals is at best procedurally onerous, and at worst indicative of cowardice. Despite his acknowledged combat experience, Broward cannot occupy the soldier-self as conceived within *The Outpost*.

The film couches its conception of soldiering and its visual-ideographic function in terms that make the necessity of violence unavoidable. Both PFC Yunger and Cpt. Broward stand outside of the soldier-self because they are incapable of embracing this violence; Yunger is too traumatized, Broward too conciliatory. *The Outpost* diminishes the openly imperialistic dimensions of this orientation in much the same way that films

like *Black Hawk Down* do. The mission of the soldiers, such as it exists, is to survive and ensure the survival of their comrades, which in turn becomes its own form of heroism. (Klien 2005) Unfortunately, this winds up reinscribing visual representations of infantry as a point of honorific sacrifice. Our memorials and iconic images implicitly (or overtly in the case of the Korean War Memorial) cast combat-equipped infantry as visual markers of an ongoing struggle that, whatever its horrors, must be sustained. Neither Yunker nor Broward respond unreasonably to the circumstances they face, at least from a civilian perspective. Yunker's experience of watching Captain Yllescas die was undoubtedly deeply traumatic, and Broward's procedural concerns stem from his adherence to the structures of warfighting as dictated by his superiors. However, from within the soldier-self as *The Outpost* constructs it, Yunker and Broward cannot gain the trust of their comrades. Thus, despite sharing in the visual markers of infantry's understood role, they stand apart from the otherwise honorific positioning of the soldier-self.

Containment and the Soldier-Self: Afghans in The Outpost

Captain Broward's alienation from the rest of COP Keating by way of his apparent complacency towards Afghans is reflective of broader, more hostile orientations towards the Other within the soldier-self. Thus far we have established the ideographic function of combat infantry as grounded in experiences of violence and existential struggle. Images of combat-equipped infantry carry weight in part because their understood nobility is grounded in violence against an Other that deserves to be destroyed. Very often, however, this visual and emotional emphasis on soldiers decenters or obscures outright questions of whom this violence is leveraged against. As Holger

Pötzsch examines in relation to *Black Hawk Down*, the “diegetic subject-position of the soldier-self” is defined in direct opposition to the Other-as-enemy. (Pötzsch 2011) The narrative and visual language of contemporary war films centers the lived experiences of soldiers to such an extent that “the other is largely excluded from the picture and figures in the background as either an anonymous group of helpless victims to be secured, or as faceless villains posing a deadly threat.” (Pötzsch 2011) *The Outpost* reiterates this framing of the Other in its treatment of Afghans, a rhetorical positioning that paints Afghans as ignorant and dishonest at best, and malevolently deceptive at worst. The result, when paired with the ideographic function of soldiers described above, is a rhetorical construction of the war in Afghanistan that denies agency to voices other than those of soldiers, and thus positions the war itself as immutable, not warranting critique.

Though endemic in some sense to war films and depictions of soldiering, colonialist rhetorics of containment are by no means unique to the genre. Anjali Vats and LeiLani Nishime in “Containment as Neocolonial Visual Rhetoric” examine how visual depictions of the racialized Other produce a rhetoric of containment that reaffirms whiteness as the subject-position while “confining the subjectivities of racial and colonial Others,” thereby rendering them effectively voiceless. (Vats & Nishime 2013) Pötzsch (though predating Vats and Nishime) echoes the effects of this containment in *Black Hawk Down*, arguing that Somalis in the film are not merely voiceless, but spoken for through the dominant discursive frame. Scenes where Somalis are allowed to speak do not serve to expand the discursive frame beyond the soldier-self, but rather reify constructions of Somalis as dangerous and evil. Quoting George Monbiot of the *Guardian*, Pötzsch asserts that ““Somalis in *Black Hawk Down* speak only to condemn

themselves.” (Monbiot 2010 in Pötzsch 2011) This combines with visual language that materially obscures Somalis behind smoke and explosions, representing them as faceless masses on a surveillance screen or half-seen figures shooting at Americans. The result is a “‘hegemonic moral geography’ that lets us achieve proximity only to the death of Americans.” (Lacy 2003 in Pötzsch 2011) In denying Somalis in *Black Hawk Down* rhetorical agency beyond the soldier-self, the film confines (or contains) Somalis themselves to a construction as an ever-present yet materially ephemeral threat to American lives.

Such constructions have been quite neatly transplanted into framings of American military intervention post-9/11. Glenn Donnar examines the rhetorical confinement of enemy Others through the lens of Orientalism as a visual language of containment. By depicting Others, in particular Arabs, through visual language that codes their actions “as fundamentalist and Islamic,” post-9/11 film (specifically *The Kingdom* in Donnar’s analysis) “conflates Arabs, Muslims, and terror and represents Arab/Muslims as culturally and technologically inferior, barbaric, and violent, as well as irrational and antimodern.” (Donnar 2020) Arab Others stand apart from the subject-position of American personnel because they are inherently regarded as foreign, alien to American ideals and ways of behavior. Even those Others regarded as friendly, so-called “good Indians” (a terminology steeped in frontier mythology) are treated with suspicion. Though “their local knowledge and greater capacity to blend into the environment are coveted,” the friendly Other is nonetheless “never fully trusted, their intelligence and allegiance are considered equivalently invaluable and unreliable.” (Donnar 2020) The

good Arab remains an Arab first; their cultural embeddedness allows them to mediate for Americans, but leaves their motives ominously ambiguous.

The Outpost makes continual cursory efforts to differentiate between the Taliban and so-called “ordinary” Afghans, yet ultimately seems to conflate the two until they are meaningfully indistinguishable. Captain Keating, during the first shura shown in the film, describes his job and that of his men as “to separate the Taliban from the ordinary people,” (Lurie 2020). This description of the mission, while still very much grounded in the framing of the “good Indian,” maintains at least a nominal distinction between those the soldiers are here to protect and those they must kill. This distinction is immediately undercut, however, by the fact that at least one of the younger Afghan men present is heavily implied to have shot at the outpost. Though the young man and several of his fellows ultimately surrender their weapons to the Americans, their presence among the village elders as part of the shura visually and narratively obliterates the distinction between Taliban militant and ordinary Afghan.

The inability of soldiers at COP Keating, and thus of the audience as well, to fully tell which Afghans are friendly and which are hostile is partially a consequence of the visual language *The Outpost* uses to portray both attacking Taliban and non-hostile locals. Hostile militants are often visually obscured by smoke and gunfire, or too distant to see at all. When we do finally see Taliban fighters clearly, they are shown only in quick cuts interspersed throughout the film’s climactic battle, and appear little different from the villagers that the men of COP Keating have been interacting with. (Lurie 2020) The only meaningful distinction between good and bad Afghans in *The Outpost* is whether those Afghans are shooting at Americans. Even this, however, largely becomes a

distinction without a difference, as same visual language of “ubiquitous absence” that Pötzsch describes surrounds all Afghans in the film.

Afghan natives in *The Outpost* are wholly valenced as Other, a conception of Other that cannot be divorced from the violence it is shown enacting against American soldiers. There is very little within the film that allows one Afghan to be distinguished from another. Every Afghan, Taliban or otherwise, is dressed in the same nondescript native clothing, with the exception of Afghans militarily aligned with the Americans. This somewhat insidiously inverts the ideographic function of infantry as shown through uniforms and combat gear; just as camouflage and ammo carrier signal participation in the positively-oriented soldier-self, tunics and woolen caps mark Afghans as embodied, albeit ambiguously, in frames of perpetual tension and threat. Moreover, this disidentification with Afghans is reinforced by physical distance. Lennart Soberon, examining the film *Lone Survivor* (Berg 2013) contends that Taliban enemies are rendered ungrievable in death through visual language that only allows them to be “perceived from afar as small silhouettes in a long shot, or through a weaponized form of mediation such as a sniper rifle or drone camera.” (Soberon 2021) Pötzsch (2011) argues the same in relation to Somalis in *Black Hawk Down* (Scott 2001); the visual obscurity of enemies in modern war films both physically and emotionally distances audiences from being able to recognize the lives of Afghans beyond their role as a faceless threat. This is especially salient when paired with the narrative and visual language examined above that limits empathy to soldiers. The delineation, though never explicitly stated, is clear: those in uniform are worthy of honor and mourning, while those outside of it are not.

As Pötzsch argues, such a framing serves to rob Afghan voices within the film of rhetorical or even narrative agency. Afghan characters in the film can speak only in condemnation of themselves, and serve to demonstrate their supposed backwardness and deceptiveness in relation to the Americans. During the first shura shown in the film, one of the Afghan elders questions Cpt. Keating as to why the Americans have been there for forty years, apparently confusing our occupation with that of the Soviets. The Captain corrects him and wonders aloud to his translator, “Do they really not know this, or are they screwing with me?” (Lurie 2020) Later, a young Afghan man is caught taking photos of the mountains surrounding COP Keating from inside the outpost, an act interpreted by the soldiers as suspicious. At the second shura, another Afghan elder (notable for being the only non-military Afghan to speak English) defends the young man as a “good boy,” and appears to resent Captain Yllescas for withholding promised money in retaliation. (Lurie 2020) This suggests that the Afghan elders are less concerned with the wellbeing of their country or creating lasting peaceful relationships with the Americans than they are with personal gain.

The above incidents paint local Afghans as obfuscatingly ignorant at best, and willfully obstructive at worst. Even this ambiguity is all-but banished when, during the argument between Captain Broward and the elders at the gates, the English-speaking elder lets slip, “Everyone knows you are leaving soon. If we do not get paid now, we will never get paid!” (Lurie 2020) This doubly casts the elder, and the Afghan men he leads and represents, as deceptive and greedy. He is privy to information that the soldiers have endeavored to keep secret, and is primarily concerned with money even as he accuses the Americans of murdering a child. If the soldier-self as subject-position casts the Other as

ephemeral and ambiguous yet omnipresent threats, then the soldier-self as oriented in *The Outpost* seems to regard all Afghans as equally Other, equally likely to take up a rifle and kill Americans.

Even Afghans otherwise valenced as friendly are still placed firmly outside of the soldier-self. Mohammad, the unit's translator and one of two named Afghan characters, is consistently helpful and deferential to the Americans, and seems genuinely concerned with the wellbeing of the men stationed at Keating. However, Mohammad is also characterized as cowardly, constantly raising fears of an impending Taliban attack, a habit that Sgt. First Class Jonathan Hill describes as "crying wolf." When a fellow NCO, Sgt. Brad Larson, asks Hill if he believes Mohammad's claims, Hill replies, "He'll be serious when he's the one that's running and hiding." (Lurie 2020) Sure enough, Mohammad is found cowering in a latrine following the final Taliban attack. Unlike the soldiers he serves, Mohammad is ultimately only concerned with his own survival, and thus cannot share in the soldier-self.

The same is true of Afghan National Army (ANA) troops shown in the film. American soldiers at Keating regard the ANA as lazy and unreliable at best, undertrained and unenthusiastic troops for whom the Americans must fight the war. Minutes after the Taliban launch their massed attack, the ANA commander rushes into the outpost's command center, frantic and begging Lt. Bunderman for a way out. Many of his men have apparently broken and fled their posts at the first sign of danger, standing in stark contrast to the American soldiers facing the danger despite their fear. (Lurie 2020) Even those Afghans nominally aligned with the soldier-self stand firmly outside of it. The only

unequivocally good Afghans in *The Outpost* themselves appear merely as objects of pity, a backwards and fearful people whom the noble, resolute Americans must save.

Depictions of Afghans that place them in proximity to the soldier-self cannot escape being subsumed into, as Donnar characterizes them, constructions of the “good Indian.” (2020) Mohammad and the ANA soldiers posted at Keating more closely resemble positive conceptions of ideographic infantry; the ANA are similarly (though distinctly) equipped as their American counterparts, and Mohammed even wears the same camouflaged fatigues as the American soldiers. Despite this, Afghan identity as constructed in *The Outpost* cannot be meaningfully separated from its associations with the Taliban and their own understood evilness by connection to 9/11. However helpful or unthreatening, Afghan natives do not exist within the soldier-self, but are oriented against a backdrop that regards them as inherently Other. In remaining visually distinct from the ideographic function of infantry, as well as emotionally distanced from soldiers as a point of contextualization, Afghan lives are cast in the best interpretation as less grievable than American lives. At its worst, *The Outpost*’s framing suggests that Afghans need not be grieved at all.

CHAPTER THREE

Generation Kill: Soldiers-as-Instruments

Production and Basis of Analysis

Generation Kill follows the course of the 2003 invasion of Iraq through the eyes of Rolling Stone reporter Evan Wright, embedded with the 1st Marine Reconnaissance Battalion. Unlike Jake Tapper and the battle of Kamdesh, Wright did not encounter and engage with stories of war after the fact. Instead, Wright was physically present for most of the events depicted in his 2004 book, also titled *Generation Kill*. This relatively minor difference is particularly relevant to my analysis, as it (at least initially) grounds the subject position of *Generation Kill* outside of the soldier-self as examined in *The Outpost*. Where Tapper was only able to convey the experiences of 3-61 CAV secondhand, in their own words, Wright is uniquely positioned to convey the words and actions of 1st Recon as he himself experienced them.

By 2008, HBO had produced and released *Generation Kill* as a 7-part miniseries which, though largely grounded in Wright's own experiences, somewhat decenters him as the POV character. Wright, referred to only as "Reporter" or "War Scribe" by the marines, exists primarily on the periphery of the show's events as a largely passive, though vocal, observer. This positioning lends Wright's book, as well as the show it inspired, a sense of authenticity grounded in lived experience, as Wright sought to "portray the marines as they were... he didn't aim to depict them as heroes or villains – but just as they were," (Grove 2022), a commitment made more impactful by Wright's

own experiences of combat. Wright, rather than speaking for the soldier-self after the fact, observes the soldier-self “speaking” on its own. Despite this, Wright’s own voice is not silent throughout the events of the book and series. Though not fully embodied in the soldier-self, Wright nonetheless shares in most, if not all of the same experiences that the marines do. This allows him the opportunity to confront the realities of war as they happen, as Wright is both subject and witness to violence firsthand.

Wright is never considered a part of the unit he travels with, and remains firmly outside the conception of soldiering conveyed in the series. Despite this, Wright’s proximity both to the marines and their experiences lends him a degree of identification not available to most civilians. In a 2010 interview with Huffington Post reporter Adam Rose, Wright and Eric Kocher (one of the Recon marines that Wright traveled with) describe how, though still very much distinct from the marines, Wright was able to connect and ultimately speak openly with the men of 1st Recon. Per Kocher, Wright gained credibility among the marines primarily by staying with them despite the perpetual danger of combat. Where Kocher argues that “your standard reporter goes over there, they survive one firefight or get in harm’s way. They pack their bags [and] go home with their story...” Wright “stayed the whole duration, to see how the story ends. Seventeen firefights, especially when the first one he took 26 rounds to the side of his door.” (Rose 2010) This places Wright in much closer proximity to the soldier-self than Tapper or the audience in relation to *The Outpost*. As a result, Wright and *Generation Kill* more broadly are able to complicate the understanding of violence inherent in the soldier-self as morally ambiguous and psychologically destructive, a far cry from the ungrievable killing framed by Pöttsch.

Previous chapters centered the soldier-self as emerging from filmic and narrative language that render the warrior's perspective the sole point of intelligibility. Wright's presence in *Generation Kill* inverts this positioning. Though connected to the soldier-self of 1st Recon emotionally, Wright nonetheless exists outside of the unit. He, and by extension the audience, confront violence from the outsider's perspective first, which in turn requires renegotiation of what that violence represents. When combined with the visual ideograph of combat infantry as examined in *The Outpost*, *Generation Kill*'s conception of the soldier-self begins to subvert the traditional ideological commitment to honored, collective sacrifice.

In embodying the soldier-self and adopting the mantle of ideographic infantry, marines of 1st Reconnaissance Battalion are sublimated into a frame of war that eliminates the personal or moral agency of the subject-position. *Generation Kill*, much like *Full Metal Jacket*, orients images of combat infantry around dehumanization and senseless violence, precluding any conception of the War in Iraq as just or necessary. Ultimately, *Generation Kill* is much less sanguine about the prospects of American imperialism than the other media here examined. Where *The Outpost* and *Winter Soldier* position soldiers as ideological totems embodying the redemptive potential of military action, *Generation Kill* deconstructs positive orientations towards soldiers (marines) and soldiering by emphasizing the warrior as an individual without individual agency, subject to structures of war beyond their knowledge or power to change. Rather than an honorific object, the marine in *Generation Kill* is a human being, far from home and under the unflinching control of a war and a military that regard them as equally expendable.

Regrettably, I do not believe that *Generation Kill* succeeds in providing an unequivocally anti-Imperialist orientation towards the War on Terror. Though it effectively complicates the unquestioning position of warriors-as-totems, deliberate narrative ambiguity and near-total emphasis on the American perspective in Iraq ensure that *Generation Kill* can only truly be as anti-war as the audience are themselves. A line commonly (though likely apocryphally) attributed to French filmmaker and critic François Truffaut holds that there is no such thing as a truly anti-war film. Though no clear references exist to this particular construction, Truffaut did express anxieties about the potential for staged, filmed violence to speak to the reality of the events it depicts.

Truffaut:

...a fiction film entails looking for other people's motives, not just their political motives but their personal motives. In the end, the film would merely consist in showing a victim, a man who had been subjected to an entirely unjust and appalling fate, and, on the other, the mechanism leading up to it. This would be inappropriate, *for to show something is to ennoble it* [emphasis mine]. (Truffaut in de Baecque 2022)

While *Generation Kill* and the book on which it is based depict the lived experiences of real human beings, they do so through a screen of mediation. This is doubly true of the show; though it holds very closely to the events of the book, certain characters are composited into fictionalized versions, and sequences of events are altered or compressed for the sake of narrative clarity. Though not strictly antithetical to a story grounded in authenticity, these changes nonetheless erect barriers between the real events and depictions of them. Sue Tait examines the limits of this mediation in relation to images of real-world violence and concludes that “Visual imagery is always the reduction of another's experience to a surface, excising the subjectivity of presence – the smell, touch, and sound of the ‘real.’” (Tait 2008) This reduction of experience requires negotiation, a

process equally reliant on the presentation of violence as on the orientation of the spectator. In sum, while *Generation Kill*'s depictions of violence in war achieve ambiguity through verisimilitude, this same ambiguity leaves open space for positive interpretations grounded in post-9/11 cultural consciousness. Even in the show itself, the shadow of the twin towers looms tall.

Subverting the Visual Ideograph of <Infantry>

[AN: Brackets here represent standard academic convention for describing ideographs in text. Previous chapters have addressed ideographs sans brackets in an effort to define my conception of infantry as such. From here on, this definition will be treated as established, and <infantry> will be represented accordingly.]

As examined in relation to *The Outpost*, representations of infantry in combat gear function ideographically in American culture by way of their pervasiveness and visual nebulousness. If the soldier or marine shown with helmet, ammo carrier, and rifle has no defined identity, then any observer is able to transpose themselves into the image. Moreover, individual soldiers within *The Outpost*, and especially within *Winter Soldier*, are held to possess a level of agency in determining the moral dimensions of the war in which they participate. As in the cases of the flag raising on Iwo Jima and the Korean War Veterans Memorial, these images are oriented around a collective commitment to support military personnel and honor those who have died in America's defense, ostensibly by their own moral volition. *Generation Kill* repeatedly subverts this ideographic framing by overtly mocking it. As Eric Kocher's character quips in the show, "if they say we fought valiantly here, I want 'em to know we fought retarded." (Burns & Simon 2008) Steeped in the casual ableism of the early 2000s as it may be, Staff Sergeant

Kocher's statement is emblematic of *Generation Kill*'s attitude towards conceptions of soldiering as inherently noble, of soldiers (marines) as universally praiseworthy objects. Rather than fall victim to processes of honorific mythmaking, *Generation Kill* places marines under the auspices of an imperialistic machine with little regard for clean warfare or moral justification, so long as the outward appearance of strategic success is maintained.

Both *The Outpost* and *Generation Kill* expand the ideographic scope of <infantry> by providing space for soldiers and marines to be valenced as more than their profession, which in *The Outpost* primarily serves to engender audience identification with and sympathy for military personnel. The same is true of *Generation Kill*, but is at least partially inverted by a framing that does not paint military service positively. The presumption inherent in <infantry> as an abstracted image is that to be embodied in the soldier-self is to participate in a noble collective commitment. *Generation Kill* rejects this construction and instead asserts that to join the military and become the soldier-self is to enter into a machine of idiocy. This understanding of warfare reflects an emphasis on systems, rather than individual will, common to other of David Simon's works such as *The Wire*, a long-running HBO series following the War on Drugs in Baltimore. Unlike *Outpost* and *Winter Soldier*, *The Wire* and *Generation Kill* pit their characters most prominently against institutions rather than a defined external enemy. (Lavik 2011)

Outpost and *Winter Soldier* certainly contain strains of this orientation, as discussed in their respective chapters. However, both embed critiques of American imperialism's structures within frameworks of outward, existential threat that displace responsibility for depicted suffering onto the Other. *Generation Kill*, by contrast, repeatedly emphasizes the

institutions of American imperialism as the thing in the way. As in *The Wire*, gritty realism, verisimilitude, and intertextuality in *Generation Kill* generate a backdrop of narrative and moral ambiguity against which institutions and their relationships to individuals can be reexamined.

This desire to reconceptualize previously taken-for-granted orientations towards our military, and war more generally, is by no means limited to retrospective media. Heidi Hamilton examines how, in the leadup to the invasion of Iraq, anti-war protestors sought to co-opt and redefine patriotism apart from support for the war, an effort intended to make “all Americans question their own social reality of what it means to be a ‘patriotic American.’” (Hamilton 2017) After establishing patriotism as an ideograph under McGee’s (1980) definition, Hamilton explores how <patriotism> during times of war is primarily conflated with militarism, generating an ideological frame in which “love of country implies the willingness to sacrifice and to die for it.” (Hamilton 2017) Anti-war protestors are thus rendered unpatriotic, a framing that peace movements must elide by redefining <patriotism> apart from militarism and through other ideographs, such as <peace>, <dissent>, or <the flag>. (Hamilton 2017) These redefinitions are not limited solely to alternative ideographs; the broader principle lies in reorienting the meaning of ideographs, in the case of my analysis <infantry>, through other abstracted concepts.

Traditional understandings of <infantry>, as examined in relation to Iwo Jima and the Korean War memorial, conflate militarism and <patriotism> in much the same way that Hamilton examines. The simple fact that the marines on Mt. Suribachi are raising the Stars and Stripes rather than, say, the Marine Corps flag, grounds their actions as warriors

in the language of <patriotism>. In a very literal sense, the flag as a representation of American ideals is bolstered by the military. *Generation Kill* rejects this synthesis in part by showing the marines to be largely uninterested in the average American's understanding of what it means to be <patriotic>, though manifestations of this disinterest are varied. 1st Recon is equally dismissive of Americans who oppose the war as it is of those who support it, and as a result prevents meaningful audience identification with militarism as a component of <patriotism>.

In the first episode, set a couple of days prior to the invasion itself, Corporal Ray Person receives and mocks a letter from the States in which a young boy expresses admiration for the marines (whom he misidentifies as “Army men”). Notably, Cpl. Person's disdain stems primarily from the fact that the boy is hoping for peace, an aspiration that Person dismisses as appealing to “tree-hugging bisexuals like you and your parents,” but not a “death-dealing, blood-crazed warrior who wakes up every day just hoping for the chance to dismember my enemies and defile their civilizations.” (Burns & Simon 2008) This initially seems to suggest militaristic violence as the only true manifestation of <patriotism>, as anyone who advocates for peace is valenced as a “wine-sipping, communist dick-suck.” (Burns & Simon 2008) Homophobia and latent homoeroticism (particularly in reference to fellow marines) reinforce <infantry> as grounded in a particular view of performative, violent masculinity.

However, militarism, or at least civilian conceptions of militarism as <patriotism>, are equally mocked as pandering and performative. In episode 2, whilst stuck in a convoy of both military and civilian vehicles, Cpl. Person derides what he describes as “cheesy moto bullshit” when he sees marine trucks painted with slogans

such as “Let’s Roll,” “Angry American,” and “Don’t Tread on Me.” (Burns & Simon 2008) The first two in particular became prominent mantras of support for the War on Terror; “Let’s Roll” is a reference to the last recorded words of Todd Beamer, one of the passengers aboard United Airlines flight 93 during 9/11, while “Angry American” refers to the Toby Keith song “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American),” a jingoistic pro-war song written in direct response to the events of 9/11 and echoing a collective desire for revenge through military action. These slogans, both within the context of the show and in American culture more broadly, function ideographically. As McGee defines them, ideographs act as “one-term sums of an orientation,” (1980), snippets of text or speech that embody the broader principles of an ideology by way of allusion. Both in their raw content, and in their visual contextualization as examined by Edwards and Winkler (1997), the phrases written on the marines’ vehicles place the invasion of Iraq within a particular understanding of military action as justified vengeance for the losses of 9/11.

In mocking these slogans, Ray Person rejects the ideographic convergence of <infantry> and <patriotism> as performed by civilians. As he characterizes it, “I’m a marine, I don’t need to fly a little fucking patriotic flag on my car to show I’m patriotic.” (Burns & Simon 2008) It is important to note that Person is *not* discarding <patriotism> as a component of the soldier-self or <infantry>. The Corporal still describes himself as patriotic, and seems even to suggest that his identity as a marine makes this patriotism self-evident. He is, however, discarding performative support for militarism as a form of genuine patriotism. Whereas conventional renderings of <infantry> connect these representations to <patriotism> as conceived by the American whole, *Generation Kill*

embeds <infantry> and thus the soldier-self in an understanding of <patriotism> that does not and cannot speak to the whole. The collective commitment of the American populace and that of the Marine Corps are not one and the same, narrowing the audience's frame of identification with 1st Recon and closing off <infantry> as a point of mutual intelligibility.

This, however, leaves the audience somewhat suspended. The density of detail in *Generation Kill* generates an impression of authenticity that blurs the line between raw journalism and dramatic fiction, achieved in part by cleaving very closely (though not wholly) to Wright's book, itself unequivocally a work of journalism. *Generation Kill* presents its depiction of 1st Recon as a metonym for the US military in Iraq, a construction self-evident in the book and show's title and central premise. Wright, as well as Simon and Burns, sought to convey a particular understanding of the Iraq War oriented through the experiences of individual marines that, ostensibly, serves as a microcosm of every American servicepersons' experience in the War on Terror. <Infantry>'s dissociation from civilian conceptions of patriotic militarism emerges from the show's own limited scope; authentic as it may be, *Generation Kill*'s narrative speaks almost exclusively to the experiences of marines-as-marines. The question for audiences thus becomes one of contextualization: if the events of the show are accepted as brute facts, how are the marines, and ultimately the audience, to understand them?

This, unfortunately, is where I believe *Generation Kill*'s potential for meaningful critique begins to fall apart. Both the show and the book should be commended for their commitment to portraying the actuality of events, particularly within a media landscape rife with heroic mythmaking and historical revisionism. However, in so strictly

narrowing the scope of its examination, *Generation Kill* produces, per Roy Scranton, a “limited view on ‘reality,’ a view that happens, by its lack of any context or divergent perspective, to conform with an unexamined belief in American exceptionalism and imperial supremacy.” (2010) While I believe that Scranton somewhat neglects what efforts *Generation Kill* does make to complicate the picture, he correctly assesses that, barring deliberate contextualization, stories such as those of 1st Recon can and will be fitted into cultural-ideological frameworks that support the very institutions *Generation Kill* nominally critiques.

Generation Kill, similarly to *The Outpost*, suggests the presence of life beyond military service through allusions (primarily letters from home), but it does so entirely within the context of marines-as-marines, a limitation in scope that leaves it to the audience to fill in gaps of meaning. Inasmuch as *Generation Kill* centers the role of institutions of warfare, it does so entirely from a point of view embedded within those institutions. I wish to emphasize that this positioning does *not* diminish *Generation Kill*’s value in examining how <infantry> orients understandings of the War on Terror. As we will see further on, *Generation Kill* repeatedly complicates positive orientations towards soldiers and soldiering in ways that *The Outpost* and *Winter Soldier* do not. However, in terms of offering meaningful critique of American imperialism rather than merely its outcomes, *Generation Kill* remains too narrowly focused to speak beyond the context of 1st Recon’s experiences, which are themselves a barely-representative sampling of the invasion of Iraq, let alone the War on Terror as a whole.

Despite the lack of broader contextualization, the picture that *Generation Kill* presents of <infantry> is by no means one-dimensional. Characters in *Generation Kill*

exist primarily, if not solely, as marines, yet are afforded a limited level of individuality and rhetorical agency that allow them to be more than mere components of a machine. Similarly to *The Outpost* and other instances examined, <infantry> provides a means of individuation within the soldier-self, if not beyond it. As previously discussed, soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen in the Korean War Memorial are only distinguishable from one another through their equipment and thus through their particular role within the military. This equipment (weapons, armor, camouflaged clothing) thus becomes both an in-group marker of identification and a visual marker of professionalism. Infantry gain a particular identity within the military through the job they perform, a role defined by what they carry and how they are trained to use it.

Generation Kill maintains this framing insofar as individual marines are defined largely by their role in the unit. The show primarily, though not exclusively, follows Evan Wright's travels in 1st Recon's Bravo Company lead Humvee, which serves as a microcosm of this individuation. Corporal Ray Person, mentioned above, is the driver and Radio Telephone Operator (RTO), and as such rarely carries a rifle, instead operating the team's radio set and maintaining communications with the rest of the unit. Sergeant Brad Colbert, the Humvee team's leader, is distinguished by his rifle, equipped with a night vision optic and under-barrel grenade launcher, both of which enable him to more accurately spot targets and direct his team to engage them. Lance Corporal James Trombley and Corporal Walt Hasser alternate between operating the Humvee's mounted grenade launcher and providing fire support with a squad light machinegun, also called a SAW. (Burns & Simon 2008) Each member of Hitman 2-1 Alpha (the Humvee's callsign within the larger unit) plays a specific part in the vehicle's operation as defined by the

equipment they carry and use, a role further contextualized within the scope of the platoon, company, or division. <Infantry> again stands as a means of differentiation within the soldier-self.

Generation Kill subverts, or at the least complicates <infantry's> association with professional identity by showing that Marines in 1st Recon are often not given what they need to enact their role as marines. A key point of contention throughout the series is the failure of Bravo Company's Operations Chief, a Gunnery Sergeant mockingly nicknamed "Casey Kasem," (real name Ray Griego) to adequately supply the Company with essential supplies, especially batteries and gun lubricant. Before the invasion, as marines are preparing to "step off," Sgt. Colbert encounters a group trying to fix their Humvee, given to them mere days before. As Corporal Jeff "Dirty Earl" Carisalez eloquently puts it, "Back home, they're drivin' around in Mercedes-Benz SUVs, pickin' up their poodles at the dog cappuccino stand. And here we are invading a country with ghetto hoopties." (Burns & Simon 2008) In perhaps the clearest subversion of <infantry>, every member of 1st Recon (as well as every other marine seen in the show) is issued the wrong camouflage for their MOPP suits (chemical protective gear), receiving woodland instead of desert patterns (with the notable exception of Wright himself). These and countless other instances of marines being inadequately or improperly equipped do not fully dissociate <infantry> from professionalism; the marines of 1st Recon complain about the inadequacies, but still enact their roles successfully. They do, however, place the marines' professional identity in tension with those imposing this identity upon them. Inasmuch as <infantry> are defined by the job they perform and the equipment they carry, *Generation Kill* presents the performance of this identity as a source of perpetual

difficulty and frustration rather than camaraderie. To be embodied in the soldier-self as represented by <infantry> is to be in conflict with the military itself.

While a continual source of griping among the men of 1st Recon, it should be noted again that equipment failures and logistical shortcomings do not meaningfully prevent the marines from enacting their roles as warriors. The camouflage mix-up is merely the most visible instance in which the marines' role is hindered from within. Throughout the course of their invasion, 1st Recon are continually subjected to food and equipment shortages, weapon malfunctions, navigational errors, and seemingly senseless tactical decisions, all imposed by officers and command structures that are incompetent at best, and apathetic at worst. Despite this, and no small share of complaining, the marines of 1st Recon virtually always carry out their orders. The wrongness of the marines' uniforms subverts the understood meaning of <infantry> in relation to the structures it is supposed to represent. As observers, we can hardly be expected to maintain an unqualifiedly positive view of military service when those most thoroughly embodied within it do not, a sentiment reinforced by an obvious and eminently avoidable mistake. Even civilians understand that woodland camouflage is unsuited to a desert environment; the marines just look wrong. However, the marines remain marines, even when improperly dressed and equipped. Barring one instance in which Lieutenant Nathaniel Fick refuses to carry out the orders of his Captain (one we will discuss in depth later), the marines of 1st Recon never buck the structures that deprive or misuse them. Thus, though <infantry> as presented in *Generation Kill* does not positively embody the military as a whole, it nonetheless maintains the framing of individual soldiers and marines as

professionals, dedicated to performing their duty even when disadvantaged by the institutions they serve.

Simultaneously and somewhat troublingly embedded in this understanding of <infantry> is a certain level of inevitability ascribed to American conquest. This is openly alluded to by marines within the show, especially Sergeant Antonio Espera, who we will discuss in more detail further on. As 1st Recon's convoy moves away from its staging area to begin the invasion, Espera shouts half-jokingly, "Look at that! White man won't be denied." (Burns & Simon 2008). Espera's remarks are emblematic of *Generation Kill*'s wider struggle with <infantry's> relationship to imperialism. Rather than critique the central conceit underlying the Iraq War, *Generation Kill* contents itself with "a rather straightforward narrative about personal and institutional failures to uphold the values of benevolent imperialism." (Scranton 2010) The problem of American imperialism as examined within *Generation Kill* thus becomes one of hypocrisy rather than underlying intent. There is undeniable merit in examining the ways in which the ethos of conquest is internally contradictory, and in holding institutions to account for their responsibilities to those under their power. The problems of imperialism, however, cannot be limited to how its institutions treat their human instruments. As Maltby and Parry (2016) contend, strictly personalized narratives of war risk decontextualizing and thus depoliticizing the wars they show. *Generation Kill*'s limited focus provides ample space for the meaning of <infantry> to be expanded in its relationship to the institutions it represents, but not its broadest cultural sense. We may regard 1st Recon's officers or even the military as a whole as apathetic, bureaucratic, and mechanistic, but the individual

grunt (and thus the collective effort in which they participate) remains, if not honorific, worthy of admiration.

The Soldier-Self in Generation Kill: “What does Godfather think?”

The soldier-self as conceived by Pötzsch envisions the privileged subject position of military personnel in film as an epistemological barrier that orients depictions of violence around necessary, sacrificial efforts to counter or contain the Other. (Pötzsch 2011) Thus far we have largely examined the soldier-self as a component of <infantry’s> ideographic function: depictions of soldiers in combat gear direct sympathetic and honorific commitments that are at least partly grounded in the necessity of war. We honor the suffering and death of those in the military because their role-as-soldier is required to avert some greater evil.

As discussed previously, the language of military intervention in the United States is often closely tied to frontier mythology, a construction of American colonial expansion that frames violence against native peoples (Others) as the crucible for a new national identity. (Slotkin 1992) President Theodore Roosevelt sought to sublimate racial tensions in the United States by orienting American identity around rugged individualism, self-reliance, and martial strength, a construction of America that echoes the frontier myth’s reliance on redemptive violence. Ultimately such efforts were more akin to assimilation than true integration. Though ostensibly extended to foreign immigrants, non-white, and white Americans alike, Roosevelt’s vision of “true Americanism” required those seeking to become full Americans to “drop their hyphen,” in other words to discard entirely their identity-as-immigrant. (Dorsey 2007) Frontier mythology per Roosevelt thus still relies on performative masculinity and violence, literal and metaphorical, as a means of full

identification with the American-self. Overt demonstrations of military might, such as the worldwide tour of the “Great White Fleet” (Dorsey 2007) were bolstered by a rhetoric of sublimated individualism in which collective commitment to American ideals is defined in opposition to an Other that must be either assimilated or destroyed for American identity to flourish.

In characterizing the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush relied heavily on frontier language and imagery to cast the Global War on Terror as the horizon of a new frontier. President Bush’s assertion that “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,” reiterates the frontier myth’s division between civilized and uncivilized peoples as the constitutive point for American identity. (West & Carey 2006) Even more explicitly invoking the frontier myth is the language of cowboy mythology; phrases such as “smoke them out” and “Wanted: Dead or Alive” in reference to suspected terrorists equate them with constructions of the savage native, which the frontier hero must destroy to secure space for American identity to grow. (West & Carey 2006) Barbara Biesecker examines this framing in relation to post 9/11 melancholia, characterizing it as “a public ‘political will’ that, with considerable irony, cedes the power of the citizenry to the remilitarized state for the sake of protecting what *will have been lost* [emphasis in original].” (Biesecker 2007) Biesecker argues that the impetus to military action after 9/11 came less from the material and personal losses of that day and more from a promised loss-to-come of the American way of life. Frontier rhetoric under this framing emerges, as it did for Roosevelt, as the means by which to avert the future destruction of American identity through outward-oriented, imperialistic violence.

Pötzsch's conception of the soldier-self strongly echoes frontier orientations towards military violence. The soldier-self is threatened by the amorphous, "ubiquitously absent" specter of the Other, and must secure their survival through violence against this Other. (Pötzsch 2011) The epistemological barriers erected between soldier and Other allow the soldier-self to retain a stable self-concept even as they kill fellow human beings. Zoë Hess Carney and Mary Stuckey hold that frontier rhetoric structures this Othering along historically established lines of American imperialist discourse. (2015) Just as Presidents during the so-called Indian Wars conflated "the members of a number of different cultures and nations into one seemingly coherent entity," (Carney & Stuckey 2015) the "terrorist" label places military intervention post-9/11 within a rhetorical framework that regards all opposition, regardless of origin or ideology, as equally formless and threatening.

As in other instances examined here, *Generation Kill* seems initially to embrace this framing more or less unquestioned. The marines of 1st Recon embody the soldier-self through the continual performance of violent masculinity against ill-defined enemies (or one another when bored), an orientation that bolsters traditional understandings of <infantry> as instruments of justified violence. However, while the particular circumstances of the invasion largely orient this violence against Iraqis, the marines themselves seem, at least at first, largely unconcerned with who it is they fight. Rather, as Corporal Person's mocking response to the child's letter suggests, 1st Recon is embodied in a more general "Born to Kill" attitude, a manifestation of warrior spirit that cares little for who it is pitted against.

This indifference is reinforced through Evan Wright as the audience PoV character, as he continually questions the motivations behind the invasion. Each time he does so, Corporal Person (ever the most vocal member of 2-1 Alpha) dismisses his concerns in much the same vein as the child's letter. Towards the end of the 6th episode, as 1st Recon prepares to enter Baghdad, the battalion is ordered to change out of their MOPP suits and into regular fatigues. This signals to everyone, Wright included, that the threat of chemical weapons and thus the presumed justification for the invasion is gone or never existed. Wright is the only character to openly question this order, and appears genuinely disconcerted, asking "No, really, if we're not in our MOPP suits, then that means there's no WMDs (weapons of mass destruction). If there's no WMDs, then why are we here in the first place?" Person's response is emblematic of the larger attitude: "I knew you were a fucking gay-ass liberal! You tried to pretend by invading Iraq with us, but I knew!" Wright remains unconvinced: "I'm serious, Ray. Isn't that the whole point of us being here?" Corporal Trombley's response is even more concise: "The point is we get to kill people, you dumb fuck." (Burns & Simon, 2008) Despite his closeness with the men of 1st Recon and his presence during every firefight, Wright remains firmly outside of the soldier-self in large part because he openly questions why they need to kill Iraqis or invade to begin with. Wright cannot, even facetiously, adopt the frontier-like orientation towards violence that embodiment in the soldier-self demands.

The response from within the soldier-self dismisses Wright's concerns: 1st Recon is invading and killing because that is what marines do. The inevitability of American conquest makes seeking a rationale for the invasion a pointless exercise, at least to those enacting it. Corporal James Trombley in particular accepts and even embraces violence

against the Other as a component of identification with the Marine Corps. He repeatedly complains throughout the early series that he hasn't gotten to shoot anyone, and grins gleefully when he finally does kill an Iraqi in combat. (Burns & Simon 2008) However, Trombley is himself valenced as an outlier within the context of 1st Recon. Though most if not all of the marines to some extent embrace violence as a component of warrior culture, Trombley is unique and more than a bit unnerving, even to fellow marines, in his overt excitement to perform that violence, whether it be against Iraqi soldiers, insurgents, civilians, or even dogs. Where Corporal Trombley unquestioningly accepts killing as part and parcel of his identity as a marine throughout the series, most of the other members of 1st Recon move away from the frontier-violence orientation of the soldier-self as they discover firsthand what enacting that violence actually entails.

Part of this shift in orientation stems from the conduct of Bravo Company's senior officers and NCOs, as well as those in command of 1st Recon more generally. Though the enlisted men of 1st Recon, as well as junior officers and NCOs, initially embody the violent, outward orientation of <infantry> discussed above, they grow distanced from it as their senior leadership fail to adequately embody their role within the unit and the soldier-self. As mentioned above, Bravo Company's Operations Chief is repeatedly criticized, particularly by Sgt. Colbert, for failing to provide adequate provisions to his troops. This is especially relevant given that, as Operations Chief, the Gunnery Sergeant is specifically tasked with "procuring supplies necessary for [the company's] combat readiness." (Burns & Simon 2008) By not securing the equipment his Marines need, GySgt. Griego is failing to adequately embody his role within the unit or the soldier-self or to provide his marines with the means to do the same, and further refusing to take

responsibility for these shortcomings by shuffling responsibility off to the person who held the job before.

Not even the unit's senior leadership, those ostensibly most qualified to direct the soldier-self, embody it adequately, at least from the perspective of infantrymen like Colbert and Person. The battalion's lead NCO, Sergeant Major John Sixta, repeatedly and absurdly demands enforcement of grooming standards (particularly moustache shaving) under combat conditions, a level of micromanagement that frustrates and baffles his men. The battalion's commanding officer, Colonel Stephen Ferrando (referred to almost exclusively as Godfather, even by himself) seems much more concerned with appearances and glory-seeking than the safety or wellbeing of the marines under his command. In this sense, Col. Ferrando centers his efforts, and those of his men, around maintaining the outward impression of the soldier-self as idealized <infantry> to his superiors, even when doing so unnecessarily endangers the lives of the men under his command.

In episode 2, Col. Ferrando orders 1st Recon to push unsupported through the heavily fortified town of Nasiriyah, despite (or perhaps because of) previous marine attempts failing to secure passage. It should be noted here that the 1st Marine Reconnaissance Battalion is, as the name would suggest, a reconnaissance unit, not an assault or combat element. The marines of 1st Recon were traveling in often open-topped, unarmored Humvees and trucks, a posture which left them infinitely more exposed than Regimental Combat Teams supported by tanks and infantry fighting vehicles. Moreover, the assault through Nasiriyah is conducted in broad daylight rather than the promised night push, not even allowing the marines to use night vision and thermal optics to their

advantage. Improbably, Bravo Company is able to push through and to the other side of Nasiriyah without a single casualty: no men killed or injured. In a later conversation with a handful of his closest officers and NCOs, Ferrando explains his orders thusly:

I could put it in terms of tactics and strategy. I could quote Boyd. But the simple way to say it is that some people might reasonably fear these Iraqis running around trying to organize ways to kill us. I don't... I simply have a bigger fear. In my darkest hours, I sometimes fear that I will do something General Mattis [Major General James Mattis, commander of the 1st Marine Division] won't like. Gentlemen: I have no such fears tonight. (Burns & Simon 2008)

Col. Ferrando explicitly justifies putting his men into untenable, potentially disastrous circumstances in terms of his own desire to satisfy *his* commanding officer; moreover, he seems genuinely to expect the same of the Marines under his command. If Godfather's mission is to make General Mattis happy, the mission of 1st Recon seems to be to make Godfather happy. In this and numerous other instances throughout the show, *Generation Kill* places <infantry> not in service of positive collective commitments, but in the hands of self-centered, appearance-focused officers whose concern for their men is, at best, secondary, and at worst, nonexistent. The ideographic function of military personnel as honorific objects cannot be reconciled with an overarching structure that, at every turn, conducts itself dishonorably. This simultaneously divorces the soldier-self as embodied in 1st Recon from established frontier framings of threat-as-Other. Iraqi soldiers and insurgents still represent the most immediate, physical threat to marines' safety; they are, after all, the ones shooting at the marines, and the marines themselves largely accept the dangers of combat as a component of their chosen identity. What they do *not* accept, at least not unquestioningly, are the conditions under which they are expected to meet this threat.

Sergeant Antonio “Poke” Espera, another team leader in Bravo Company, emerges throughout *Generation Kill* as one of if not the most outspoken voices of dissent and critique within 1st Recon. Like most of his fellow marines, Poke seemingly embraces the frontier orientation of violence that the soldier-self presents in the early stages of the invasion, but with a distinctly tongue-in-cheek edge. In multiple instances, Sgt. Espera waxes eloquent on the invasion of Iraq as a continuation of colonialism and the “white man’s burden,” a source of black comedy given his ambiguously Hispanic ethnic background and the fact that he is participating in these structures himself. Espera characterizes his joining the Marines as “playing on the white man’s team,” (Burns & Simon 2008) and, though critical, initially treats these framings as little more than an ironic joke. The humor in these statements is ultimately overridden by horror and disillusionment as Sgt. Espera witnesses and enacts violence firsthand, experiences that quickly distance him from the gung-ho default position of the soldier-self. The idealized soldier or warrior enacts violence against an ambiguous Other that, through its malice towards the soldier, is rendered as justifiably killable. (Pötzsch 2011) Poke and the men of 1st Recon are distanced from this conception by an imposed rather than embodied frame of violence that does not distinguish between threatening and non-threatening Others.

Unlike *The Outpost*, *Generation Kill* does not shy away from acknowledging that American forces were and are responsible for uncounted numbers of civilian deaths during the War on Terror in every theater of operations, from Iraq to Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia. (Currier 2013) The only instance of American soldiers being blamed for civilian deaths in *The Outpost* is presented as a money-seeking lie on

the part of Afghan locals, who are themselves repeatedly conflated with the Taliban. Every other instance in which Americans kill Afghans is justified by the Afghans posing a direct threat to their lives, a clear reinforcement of the ambiguously threatening Other outlined by Pötzsch, (2011) and a tacit reiteration of frontier violence as a means of self-protection. *Generation Kill* overtly rejects this framing by repeatedly showing American troops killing unarmed, nonthreatening civilians, not only by accident but by deliberate action. Some of these instances can certainly be attributed to the fog of war. Under combat conditions, lines of command and communication almost inevitably break down, leaving units unable to coordinate with one another or provide accurate information to supporting elements. Poor communication, however, does not offer an excuse or even a justification. Most instances of civilian killings in *Generation Kill* are simply a matter of indifference on the part of those in power.

Episode 5 of the series opens with Sgt. Colbert and other members of Bravo Company observing a small hamlet from a distance. More than an hour of watching reveals no military presence and no hostile activity, only a small group of women and children, information which Colbert conveys by radio back to his platoon leader, Lieutenant Fick. As the marines continue watching and chatter idly, the hamlet is suddenly annihilated by a bomb dropped from an unseen aircraft. The marines wonder in shock and horror who authorized the strike when the unit's medic, a Navy Corpsman named Bryan, runs up and informs them that it was Godfather. Sgt. Colbert shakily tries to rationalize the attack; "We don't have the full picture... We had mortars fire on us from somewhere near that hamlet, maybe inside." Corporal Gabriel Garza is unconvinced, reminding Colbert that the Iraqi insurgents do not remain in one place after

attacking, but “shoot and scoot.” Colbert stands and offers the only weak justification he can: “I am not the one who ordered the enemy to mix in with the civilian populace and use them as cover to attack us.” (Burns & Simon 2008) Colbert and the rest of the watching marines know with near-certainty that the village posed no threat, and yet are prevented by the structures of command from criticizing Colonel Ferrando or the strike; Sergeant Colbert, whatever his personal feelings, is forced to defend the commanding officer’s actions to his men.

If the default, frontier-oriented position of the soldier-self regards the Other as inherently evil, necessitating destruction, *Generation Kill* challenges this positioning overtly by repeatedly centering instances of violence in which the Other poses no threat. These killings center Iraqis as victims not of the terroristic evil that marines supposedly exist to counter, but of the marines themselves. This acknowledgement of victimhood, particularly at the hands of Americans, is a significant step towards deconstructing the racialized frames of inevitability that surround American imperialism as bolstered by frontier rhetoric. (Butler 2009) Per Pötzsch (2011), the soldier-self is sustained by the knowledge that its enemies somehow deserve to be killed. Sgt. Colbert’s halting defense of Godfather’s airstrike on a civilian village shows the extent to which this perceived evilness is necessary to the functioning of the war machine; if the marines were able to call Godfather out on the village strike, the fundamental structure of the unit and of the military as a whole would be called into question. We see then that frontier mythology serves not merely as convenient rhetorical shorthand with which to characterize a threat, but as the foundation upon which military action can be justified at all.

There is one instance I alluded to above in which the soldier-self as embodied by 1st Recon does ultimately reject the injustices forced upon it. Lieutenant Nathaniel Fick, leader of Bravo Company's 2nd Platoon and Sgt. Colbert's direct superior, is one of few officers in the show or the book willing to openly express misgivings about the unit's conduct and general wellbeing. Part of this stems from his position of authority within the unit. As an officer, Lt. Fick is more directly able to question (though not necessarily countermand) his superiors actions than are NCOs like Colbert or Espera. In spite of this, Fick is still equally bound by the structures of military authority as everyone else. Though he has limited agency with which to push back against the worst decisions, he remains fully constrained by the shackles of authority inherent to the soldier-self.

In the final episode of the series, Fick decides to shed these constraints in an effort to protect his men when they are ordered by Bravo Company's CO, Captain Craig Schwetje, to extend their presence into unexplored parks and neighborhoods at night. Lt. Fick twice refuses the order and when confronted by Capt. Schwetje, shuts off his radio mid-exchange. Now speaking openly to Colbert, Wright, and a handful of marines from his platoon, Fick expresses his frustration: "They want me to be more aggressive, sending men into this. For what? So I can come home with 21 men instead of 22? For *what?* [emphasis in original]" Sgt. Colbert reassures the Lieutenant that he is making the right decision. Despite his conviction, Fick remains uncertain. He acknowledges that he might be wrong, citing the limits of his awareness, even when Colbert and the others under his command support him fully. (Burns & Simon 2008) Lt. Fick's conduct, particularly in contrast to that of Captain Schwetje and Col. Ferrando, further establishes the dichotomy

within *Generation Kill* between those who do and do not properly embody the soldier-self as performed by the men of 1st Recon.

Fick and his men are by no means cowardly; their combat performance throughout the invasion demonstrates that they are perfectly willing to enter into unreasonably dangerous conditions when ordered. Lt. Fick draws his line in the sand, so to speak, after weeks of continual confusion and unnecessary endangerment inflicted by distant, apathetic commanders. Seeing the end of his unit's time in Iraq approaching, Fick prioritizes the safety of his marines over acquiescence to his superiors. The soldier-self, as Fick and his men understand it, is primarily concerned with protecting those embodied within it. To men on the ground like Colbert, Fick, and the rest of 1st Recon, the mission is simply to survive.

The problems with this orientation towards the War in Iraq, and warfare more generally, are manifold and well-studied. Lt. Fick's actions within the show successfully divorce the reality of military service from a broader, culturally embedded understanding of <infantry> that regards the military itself as a site of positive, honorific commitment. There are more instances in *Generation Kill* than I can meaningfully examine here that present the institutions of imperialism as concerned with the outward appearance of success rather than the wellbeing of those who achieve it. However, this construction, in the vein of Maltby and Parry, (2016) risks reducing the experience of war to an individualized, depoliticized struggle. *Generation Kill*, intentionally or otherwise, participates in a tradition of war media such as *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg 1998), *Black Hawk Down* (Scott 2001), and even *The Outpost* which espouse "a 'new patriotism' that eschews any ideological justification for war in favor of a celebration of

the survival and sacrifice of individual soldiers.” (Ehrenhaus 2001, Klien 2005) In much the same way that opposition to the Iraq war was forced to redefine <patriotism> apart from <militarism>, (Hamilton 2017) war media that emphasize survival as the mission orient <patriotism> around a conception of <infantry> that regards survival alone as heroic. The soldier-self in this framing exists first and foremost to protect itself and those embodied within it, whether the threats come from the Other or within the military. While in some sense preferable to a more explicitly frontierist construction of violence, the survival-framing cannot help but reinscribe, at least partially, strains of heroic mythmaking surrounding the act of soldiering.

Simultaneously, Lieutenant Fick’s positioning in opposition to officers like Godfather and Capt. Schwetje suggests a clear divisibility between good and bad warriors, one that runs the risk of ennobling senseless violence by virtue of being committed by so-called good guys. By contrasting the reluctance and uncertainty of Fick, Colbert, Espera, Person, and others with the unthinking warrior mentality of Ferrando, Schwetje, and even Corporal Trombley, *Generation Kill* “allow[s] veteran viewers to separate Trombley from themselves too,” and reassures civilian viewers that, for all its failings, the military is filled with basically decent people. (Scranton 2010) As Scranton points out however, such an approach is inherently contradictory, as it “valorizes the men who commit violence on the government’s behalf even as it ostensibly critiques the violence they are asked to commit.” (Scranton 2010) *Generation Kill* is critical of the structures of imperialism insofar as they fail in their duty to protect and support those embodied within them, but fails to question why embodiment in an imperialistic machine

is necessary to begin with. We are entreated to hate the war, perhaps even to hate the military conducting it, but to sympathize with the warrior regardless.

While *Generation Kill*'s approach to complicating the soldier-self and its relationship to <infantry> succeeds in decentering the military itself as a point of honorific commitment, it does not (or perhaps cannot) avoid engendering sympathy or support for individual marines. The problems of American imperialism are instead displaced onto a particular caste within the military: the Godfathers, Craig Schwetjes, Casey Kasems, and James Trombleys are the problem. Much like *Outpost* and, as we will next examine, *Winter Soldier*, *Generation Kill* ultimately critiques outcomes before motives. If only the right people were put in charge, if only the right supplies were provided, if only the competent officers and NCOs were listened to, maybe the invasion of Iraq could have manifested into something good. It is difficult, at this point, for me to see this construction as anything but a falsehood. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was predicated on lies, conducted through deception, and accomplished little more than millions of pointless deaths and widespread regional instability. The problem was never one of leadership but of conceit: the United States entered Iraq on the presumption that our <infantry>, as foot soldiers representing a bastion of democratic progress, could set the country right. Since then, we have been repeatedly and unequivocally proven wrong.

The Uncontained Iraqi: Grievable Deaths

In portraying the actions of 1st Recon, *Generation Kill* reiterates dimensions of <infantry> that bolster broader cultural conceptions of soldiers as objects of admiration if not glorification. It shares with *The Outpost* an emphasis on survival-as-mission that centers the individual soldier or marine as a point of sympathetic identification for the

audience, even when this identification is epistemologically and experientially limited. Unlike *The Outpost*, however, *Generation Kill* does not wholly sublimate Iraqis-as-enemies into Orientalist, colonially-contained rhetorics of invisibility. Though their narrative presence is not sufficient to constitute an alternative perspective within the show, (Lavik 2011) Iraqis and other non-Americans in *Generation Kill* are often rendered sufficiently human for their lives to be grievable, rather than existing as merely faceless Others. Despite largely maintaining frames of inevitability surrounding American conquest, *Generation Kill* begins to open space for its Others to become more than monsters.

Constructions of non-white, non-American Others as less-than-human rely on limiting or erasing the agency, rhetorical and material, of the Other as a means to orient them as subjects without subjectivity. Rhetorics of containment are those discourses that “tame a potential threat to hegemonic culture and/or the norms of the status quo” by minimizing the ability of Others to exist within their own cultural frame. (Vats and Nishime 2013) The culture of the Other is still valenced as separate, even unintelligible to the dominant structures of whiteness that subsume them, but embedded within a gaze that views the community as a caricature rather than a body unto itself. (Smith 2010) Contained subjects possess no agency of their own but exist peripherally to the larger public, existing only as backdrop against which the aims of colonialism can be enacted.

As examined previously, *The Outpost* and war media in the same vein contain the Others they depict by orienting them around existing frameworks of suspicion and danger. Afghans in *The Outpost* are not individually empowered subjects, but instead are conflated with the Taliban through actions and visual indicators that cast all non-

Americans into the same characterization as potential threats. *Generation Kill* diverges from these constructions in part by acknowledging the deaths of Iraqis as grievable per Butler (2009), and thus possessing of a life beyond the threat they represent to marines. Just as allusions to the lives of marines outside the Marine Corps engender sympathy through audience identification, acknowledgement that Iraqis exist as more than ephemeral killers allows them to be more than a backdrop of understood evilness.

Much of the tension within *Generation Kill* stems from 1st Recon's interactions with local Iraqis, as they struggle to obtain accurate information about their enemies and thus discern combatants from civilians. As in *The Outpost*, the marines of 1st Recon regard Iraqis generally with suspicion, even with outright, racially-charged disdain. However, as the invasion progresses, the marines are repeatedly confronted with instances in which their assumptions regarding the Iraqis they encounter do not match the reality of the situation. This crystalizes in episode 6 when, while directing an impromptu humanitarian corridor for fleeing refugees, Sgt. Colbert is confronted by an Iraqi woman speaking English. As other marines distribute water and food to the Iraqis, the woman sarcastically thanks Colbert for "letting me pass on my own road in my own country," her evident bitterness leaving the Sergeant somewhat dumbstruck. (Burns & Simon 2008) Colbert attempts to reassure her that the Americans are here to help, but she remains unconvinced. The young woman then articulates the clearest condemnation of American imperialism present in *Generation Kill* (or, for that matter, any of my chosen texts):

You know, this is a very beautiful country, and our president is very stupid. Maybe you are here for liberation, I don't know. But because of oil, it feel [sic] like war of aggression. (Burns & Simon 2008)

This confrontation represents the moment in *Generation Kill* in which Iraqis are most explicitly un-contained. The woman, though unnamed and, compared to the marines, uncharacterized, possesses a level of rhetorical agency that even the marines do not. Where the men of 1st Recon are restrained, structurally and epistemologically, from condemning the institutions they inhabit, the Iraqi woman openly questions not only the marines' actions but their presence in Iraq to begin with. The woman's confrontation openly challenges the frontierist screens of mediation that regard Others and their culture as an Orientalized canvas upon which the actions of the dominant, white culture take place. (Smith 2010) Rather than be spoken-for by the discursive frame of the colonizer, Iraqis in *Generation Kill* can begin to speak for themselves.

I say begin because *Generation Kill* ultimately divides its Iraqis along lines of good and bad in much the same way it does the marines. Such efforts are not inherently problematic; if nothing else they enable Iraqis in the show to be more than a monolith, all cast as either wholly villainous or sympathetically ignorant and pitiable. However, *Generation Kill* reifies colonialist constructions of the "Good Indian," (Donnar 2020) by providing only limited space in which Iraqis can meaningfully speak for themselves. The extent to which *Generation Kill* centers the lived experiences of marines means that the audience only ever experiences the Iraqi voice as the marines themselves do. Thus, our own understanding of Iraqi rhetorical agency, such as it exists, is valenced through the terministic screens that the marines themselves occupy.

Sgt. Colbert's encounter with the Iraqi woman is interrupted when another of the marines, Corporal Anthony "Manimal" Jacks, interjects thusly: "Goddamnit. Brad, we don't have to take this kind of guff. I mean, we're here liberating these ungrateful

bitches.” (Burns & Simon 2008) Manimal views the invasion and the marines’ actions strictly in terms of frontierist liberation that regard Iraqis as incapable of freeing themselves. These sentiments are echoed by other marines within the show, but contrasted with behavior that, more often than not, infantilizes Iraqis. Those Iraqis that do not represent an immediate threat are in most instances objectified, treated as little more than scenery or a tactical hazard. By contrast, threatening Iraqis, particularly those openly allied with Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime, maintain the position of monstrous Others. Instances of overt rhetorical agency on the part of Iraqis, such as that of the woman confronting Colbert, are always countered from within the dominant discursive position of the marines themselves.

Somewhat perversely, Iraqis in *Generation Kill* are arguably most humanized after they have already been killed. The marines of 1st Recon are very openly affected by the sight of corpses, particularly civilian corpses, and continually troubled by the knowledge that most have been killed by marines. Godfather’s bombing of the village in episode 5 is one of numerous instances in which unarmed, unthreatening civilians are directly or indirectly killed by marine forces. Sgt. Colbert and Sgt. Espera are the marines most clearly disturbed by these instances of violence, but all of the marines, to one degree or another, are forced to confront the realities of the men, women, and children who are always caught between conflicting parties and killed.

This begins to move us away from a strictly ungrievable construction of Others as seen in *the Outpost*, if only by its open acknowledgement that wars do not solely affect active participants such as combatants. *The Outpost* muddles this distinction by conflating all Afghans depicted as connected, explicitly or ambiguously, to the Taliban.

Within the framework that *Outpost* presents, there are no true civilians, and therefore no lives to be mourned. *Generation Kill* moves away from this construction by repeatedly emphasizing that Iraqis, even those taking up arms against the marines, did not emerge fully-formed as faceless militants. As Butler emphasizes however, merely perceiving the presence of a life is not sufficient to regard that life as precarious, able to be meaningfully lost. Limited frames of grievability and precarity, if not sufficiently expanded, reinforce the “tacit interpretive scheme that divides worthy from unworthy lives,” (Butler 2009) bolstered by dominant media that orient our understanding of violence through mediation. (Tait 2008) Though *Generation Kill* provides space in which Iraqi lives can be perceived, its highly restrained perspective fails to meaningfully embed these lives apart from the dominant interpretive scheme of the marines themselves.

Generation Kill’s exclusive focus on the experiences of 1st Recon limits the show’s ability to leverage meaningful critique against the structures of American imperialism, as examined in its portrayal of officers and military command. Though it complicates unquestioningly positive conceptions of military services, it fails to meaningfully assign blame to the underlying causes, instead centering individual failures as the source of America’s military and ideological shortcomings. The same is true of *Generation Kill*’s depiction of Iraqis. The show acknowledges the humanity of Iraqis and regards the destruction of this humanity as in some sense grievable, but only to the extent that the marines themselves grieve. Just as *Generation Kill* sets up a division between good and bad marines valenced through the experiences of 1st Recon, (Lavik 2020) it delineates between grievable and ungrievable Iraqi deaths solely based on how the marines respond, a perspective steeped in frontierist rhetoric and imperialist inevitability.

Iraqi identity, such as it exists in *Generation Kill*, is only intelligible within the established framework of the soldier-self and its attendant ideographic markers. It is unable to speak meaningfully to the experiences of Iraqis during the invasion because these experiences are simply not present. Similar shows such as *The Wire* avert this in part by adopting a multiplicity of viewpoints, allowing critique to operate beyond the confines of the system it targets. (Lavik 2020) *Generation Kill*, by contrast, presents multiple characters within a single perspective. Iraqis exist either as trauma-props, vaguely-encountered lives and deaths that orient experiences within the soldier-self, or as the faceless, threatening Other.

A frame that regards Iraqis as conditionally human is in some sense preferable to a frame that regards them as wholly inhuman. At a minimum, it provides an acknowledgement that war is fundamentally an exercise in loss and trauma, that even the Other cannot be killed without consequences. It does not, however, allow for the meaningful apprehension of Iraqi lives apart from their role in our imperialistic ventures. This is due in part to a lamentable dearth of meaningful scholarship on the experiences of Iraqis in the war. Much of the scholarly research surrounding the Iraqi response to the American invasion has centered militant groups, in particular Daesh and al-Qaeda, a research emphasis that reinforces the delineation between good and bad Iraqis and reinscribes the necessity of containing or killing the bad ones. Images of Iraqi suffering and death are not inherently critical objects, nor are they exclusively anti-war. Unless paired with a broader cultural reorientation towards war's necessity, "the same antiwar photograph may be read as showing pathos, or heroism, admirable heroism, in an unavoidable struggle that can be concluded only by victory or defeat." (Sontag 2003)

Barring further contextualization, depictions of Iraqi death, however emotionally compelling, cannot be separated from dominant discursive constructions of Other-as-threat.

CHAPTER FOUR

Captain America: Winter Soldier: Soldiers-as-Superheroes

Basis of Analysis

The United States' role in the Second World War has come to define Americans' conception of our military and political roles on the global stage in a variety of ways. In our media, as well as in our broader cultural understanding, Americans see WWII as a period of clear-cut, morally-grounded intervention. In particular contrast to the ambiguity of the modern world of counterterrorism, popular depictions of the Second World War gain emotional leverage through nostalgia. If we, as Americans, have become wearied with the motivations and conduct of contemporary wars from Vietnam to Afghanistan, then WWII offers a means of national redemption through symbolic representation. The memory of WWII reminds us that, whatever our failings may be today, the United States is, or at least was, capable of moral military action. The pervasiveness of this memory is often deliberately invoked in new moments of national conflict; as David Hoogland Noon examines, President George W. Bush repeatedly hearkened to the legacy of the "greatest generation" to embed the emerging War on Terror in the language of "the good war." (2004) However, this framing presents issues both within its conception of the Second World War, and of the broader moral positioning of America's global military role. President Bush's rhetorical conflation of WWII and the War on Terror reduced understandings of both wars into a clear binarism of good and evil that elides meaningful critical engagement with the realities of either conflict. (Noon 2004) In the case of

Captain America: Winter Soldier, media of the Global War on Terror relies upon a culturally mediated understanding of WWII as a moral war to criticize modern forms of American military intervention without undermining the validity of American imperialism as a whole.

I examine the ways in which *Captain America: Winter Soldier* criticizes the Global War on Terror by positioning Captain America and his allies against the symbols of modern warfare, most prominently the aircraft carrier and the drone. *Winter Soldier's* narrative frames Captain America, also known as Steve Rogers, as a WWII relic in a modern world. Rogers represents the last vestiges of a period in which American military intervention eliminated clear existential threats. By placing Cap and his allies in opposition to enemies that strongly mirror modern American defense agencies, *Winter Soldier* supports a particular kind of military intervention as morally right while nominally condemning the modern American military apparatus. This construction relies on positioning the apparatus of modern warfare, embodied in the married images of aircraft carrier and drone, against Captain America himself as a totem of nostalgic, symbolic representation for the Second World War as a just or good war. This framing acknowledges the Global War on Terror and the means used to fight it as a site of moral ambiguity and presents the potential for soulless killing machinery to be coopted by totalitarian control. It is only Captain America, as a symbolic embodiment of the “greatest generation,” who is able to recast military intervention in terms of good and evil through opposition to this machinery, a framing which sublimates historical critique and retains space for a positive view of American imperialism.

I first examine how the images of aircraft carriers and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) or drones are married in *Winter Soldier* to condemn the mechanized, depersonalized conduct of the Global War on Terror. Both in their intended purpose and their secret, coopted role, the helicarriers (flying aircraft carriers central to the film's plot) represent a more general unease with the War on Terror as a campaign of targeted killings against distant, depersonalized, and ambiguously threatening individuals. I then explore how Captain America, as a representation of WWII-style military intervention, is valenced as the solution to this unease by evoking a return to American military action as a response to an exigent threat rather than pre-emptive action. Finally, I conclude by showing how this construction of America's military role elides meaningful critical engagement with the memory of WWII or the reality of the War on Terror by sublimating the necessity of both into a binaristic frame of good and evil. Though nominally critical of how the War on Terror is conducted, *Winter Soldier* leaves open the possibility that, prosecuted differently, American imperialism can still be productive of good.

Structures of Empire: Carrier and Drone

Captain America: Winter Soldier follows the titular character as he reemerges into the world following an extended period of hibernation. In one of the first movies which launched the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a multibillion-dollar media monolith, Captain America, aka Steve Rogers, was selected as part of an experimental super-soldier initiative during WWII. After being enhanced with superhuman speed, strength, agility, and senses, Rogers wound up frozen in an ice floe during operations to counter HYDRA, a Nazi occult-paramilitary group. *Winter Soldier*, the direct sequel to the first *Captain America*, reawakens Cap decades later in the vaguely-defined 2010s, and reenters him

into service with the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division (commonly abbreviated as SHIELD). Captain America acts as a totem of symbolic representation for a particular type of American militarism. Rogers underwent physical enhancements to become Captain America because he was too physically weak to serve in the military otherwise. He was willing to risk experimental, potentially deadly medical procedures because he believed in the moral necessity of fighting the Nazis. Rogers' decision to become Captain America reflects a particular understanding of the United States' role in World War II, one that views the risks and violence inherent in war as morally necessary.

In contrast to Captain America's origins in the Second World War, *Winter Soldier* opens by immediately grounding its action in the visual language of modern counterterrorist operations. The film begins with a raid conducted by SHIELD, in which Cap and his fellow agent, Black Widow (Natasha Romanov), are tasked with recapturing a SHIELD-owned freighter from pirates. They infiltrate the freighter alongside SHIELD operators, who are themselves equipped with real-world military equipment: high-cut ballistic helmets, plate carriers, and short-barreled M4 carbines. As the heroes push towards their respective objectives, bantering along the way, the operators position themselves outside of a room where the pirates have captured SHIELD hostages. Once all team members are positioned, the SHIELD agents open fire simultaneously, killing all of the pirates present in one fell swoop. As the bodies fall and the smoke clears, one hostage dryly remarks, "I told you. SHIELD doesn't negotiate." (Russo & Russo 2014) The film's opening raid positions SHIELD as an analogue for real-world military agencies by mirroring the aesthetics and operations of modern Special Operations Forces (SOF), a

visual language that would have been intimately familiar to filmgoing audiences at the time.

Captain Phillips (Greengrass 2013), released the year before *Winter Soldier*, gained extensive notoriety at both the box office and Academy Awards for its dramatized depiction of the 2009 hijacking of *Maersk Alabama* by Somali pirates, a crisis resolved most prominently by American SOF. To rescue the *Alabama*'s Captain, Richard Phillips, members of the Naval Warfare Special Development Group (DEVGRU, or SEAL Team Six colloquially), arguably the United States' most elite SOF unit, shot the three pirates guarding Phillips simultaneously in the head (Axe 2012), visual language that *Winter Soldier* overtly mirrors in its opening raid. In doing so, *Winter Soldier* signals both a filmic and real-world connection between SHIELD and American SOF actions during the War on Terror through the shared language of precise, directed, and impersonal violence.

Such representational similarities are common to Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films generally. As Juan Medina-Contreras and Pedro Colón (2020) examine, heroes within the MCU often have a direct or indirect connection to the military. Captain America, for instance, was a United States Army soldier during World War II, serving alongside a team dubbed the "Howling Commandos," themselves an allusion to the clandestine WWII commando groups that would become the American CIA. Iron Man, another prominent Marvel hero, began as a weapons contractor for the United States government before turning to hero work. Though superheroes emerge from and very often work with conventional forces such as police and the military, the two are not on equal footing. Per Medina-Contreras and Colón: "the police forces place themselves entirely at [the hero's] disposal, completely ignoring the chain of command," presenting a

situation in which “superheroes and defense organizations fight side by side against villains who have come, normally, from the other side of the cosmos.” (2020) This framing presents the superpowered American soldier (or soldier-analogue) capable of unifying an armed response as the best solution to an existential threat, whether that threat originates from across the planet or across the galaxy.

Winter Soldier reinforces this framing through its characterization of Captain America himself, as well as his new ally, Sam Wilson, later nicknamed the Falcon. Wilson is a retired Air Force Pararescueman, a former SOF operator who initially meets Rogers during a shared jog on Washington D.C.’s National Mall. The two later bond when Wilson invites Cap to a PTSD support group for veterans. This scene further grounds Rogers and Wilson’s roles within the film in the language of real-world military intervention. In the support group, a woman talks about experiencing flashbacks while driving after encountering improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in her military service. Sam Wilson himself confides to Rogers about losing a close friend and squadmate to an RPG (a kind of rocket launcher) during a deployment. While the war Wilson served in is left unspecified, the narrative cues present in the support group scene reinforce connections between Marvel’s superheroes and existing audience knowledge of America’s wars. There are, after all, only so many places where American soldiers and airmen are attacked with IEDs and RPGs. Ultimately, Wilson is convinced to join Captain America’s team, a decision that is framed as a kind of reenlistment. Though Sam Wilson left the military after his own experiences of loss and trauma, he is compelled to return to combat when Captain America, the ur-American soldier, has need of Wilson’s military connections and experience. This is reflective of *Winter Soldier*’s broader

positioning towards military intervention. Captain America again stands as emblematic of an era of military action grounded in clear divisions between right and wrong. His connection to the cultural memory of WWII and his status as a living member of the greatest generation suggest that whatever cause Cap takes up must be a just one. For Wilson, Captain America presents an opportunity re-enter the fight alongside a living embodiment of righteous warfare constructed through mediated cultural memory. (Ehrenhaus 2001) Though not a superhero in the same genetically enhanced, metahuman sense as Rogers, Sam Wilson's role as an SOF operator positions him as one of few who are capable of fighting alongside Captain America.

Though Cap and Falcon's pasts as SOF members are not narratively central to *Winter Soldier* as a whole, their positioning as exceptional and quasi-extralegal warriors reflects a particular understanding of Special Operations Forces' role in America's wars. As Jason McKahan (2008) examines, depictions of SOF actions since the Reagan era have increasingly emphasized performative violence as a kind of patriotic acting-out. Rather than engaging with the motivations underlying the conflicts they portray, war entertainment media repackages real-world trauma into a narrative in which the good guys win by killing the bad guys in spectacular fashion. Though *Winter Soldier* does not explicitly reinvent a particular conflict, the emphasis on performative violence remains. Cap and Falcon are victorious because they are capable of countering bad violence with good violence. Robin Andersen (2014) argues that modern depictions of SOF portray them as superhero-soldiers, fearless martyrs in an unending existential struggle for freedom. *Winter Soldier* takes this framing a step further by making SOF operators into

literal superheroes who win the day by punching, shooting, or throwing indestructible shields at the enemies until they give up or die.

However, as Medina-Contreras and Colón outline, later-era MCU films have increasingly diminished the role of conventional defense agencies and elevated the exceptional, often superhuman individuals as the *only* viable means to counter world-threatening events. Within such films, “the role played by traditional defense forces usually sides with the hero, who can always reach where they cannot.” (Medina-Contreras & Colón 2020) Heroes like Captain America and the Falcon lead conventional forces in battle because they are the only ones capable of doing so. *Winter Soldier*, however, presents an interesting inversion of this general theme. Though the primary antagonists of the film are the same cyber-Nazi faction that Rogers fought during WWII, HYDRA, Cap and his allies come to discover that HYDRA have remanifested themselves within SHIELD itself. Rather than leading conventional forces against an external threat, Captain America must unite a small team of superheroes and conventional operatives against the defense agency under which they had previously served. *Winter Soldier* maintains the positioning of a supersoldier like Captain America or the Falcon as the only effective counter to an existential threat while simultaneously criticizing the structures that created and sustained such hyper-warriors in the first place.

Winter Soldier positions SHIELD as an analogue and partner of real-world defense and intelligence agencies such as the CIA, and in doing so reflects a more general skepticism about the role of clandestine defense organizations. Matthew H. Birkhold examines how the CIA’s role in filmmaking has largely been geared towards “promoting the accuracy of films and TV shows that portray the agency.” (Birkhold 2014) The flip-

side of this cooperation however lies in the CIA's power to refuse assistance to productions that do not meet their standards of authenticity or otherwise portray the agency unfavorably. This "interest in self-promotion could spawn distortions of reality, thereby contravening the agency's stated goals" of a realistic depiction and blur the line between willing assistance and collaborative co-authorship (Birkhold 2014), a relationship between government officials and filmmakers that extends well beyond the CIA. (Alford 2016) Ultimately, the CIA (and government agencies more generally) control their own narratives, and even those who participate in such narratives are subject to their restrictions.

Winter Soldier explores the morasses of clandestine warfare by pitting Captain America, both ideologically and materially, against the apparatus of the intelligence state. During the opening raid on the pirate-captured ship, Cap discovers Black Widow performing a separate objective unknown to him, ostensibly under SHIELD's orders. When Rogers returns to SHIELD, he confronts Nick Fury, the agency's director, about the deception. Fury dismisses Rogers' concerns and casts his own actions as standard procedure or "compartmentalization. No one spills the secrets because nobody knows them all." (Russo & Russo 2014) This is particularly ironic given that it is Fury's own ignorance, fostered by his boss, that allows HYDRA to flourish unseen within SHIELD. *Winter Soldier* frames this deception, and the ambiguity of extra-governmental bodies like SHIELD and the CIA as part of the same machinery of depersonalized, corrupted warfare.

The central conflict in *Winter Soldier* revolves around the efforts of HYDRA to commandeer three semi-autonomous, heavily armed, flying aircraft carriers

commissioned by SHIELD, dubbed “helicarriers.” The carriers themselves once again mirror the visual language of real-world military operations. Since WWII, the aircraft carrier has been the centerpoint of global military strategy. Their ability to deploy a complete ground, air, and seaborne strike force virtually anywhere in the world has made carriers a prominent symbol of military might. This is particularly true in the United States, which has by far the largest and most advanced carrier fleet of any military. The mere presence of a carrier strike group in a given region indicates the capacity to launch a pre-emptive strike at virtually any time and in any place. Thus, SHIELD’s plan to use three of these carriers as a global police force is grounded in real-world military strategy. Within *Winter Soldier* the helicarriers integrate the aircraft carrier as a symbol of martial force with another weapons system that is practically endemic to the Global War on Terror: the drone.

Drones in particular are emblematic of the kind of depersonalized, amoral, distant warfighting that *Winter Soldier* criticizes, especially within the context of the Global War on Terror. Their positioning as a kind of “light war,” in contrast to the societal mobilization required by “total war” (Ohl 2015) allows UAVs to operate more freely than traditional military apparatus “by placing fewer demands on public reception, participation, and approval.” (Ohl 2015) Simultaneously, drone warfare is often characterized by rhetorics of possibility, inevitability, and “biolegitimacy.” (Jackman 2015, Rowland 2016) Drones are rendered legitimate tools of warfare through their commercial potential, ability to save both military and civilian lives, and perceived inevitability as the next development in modern warfare. What this rhetoric obscures, and what *Winter Soldier* relies upon, are the more ethically dubious dimensions of drone warfare as an

instrument of assassination within a racialized, frontier rhetoric of war and counterterrorism (Carney & Stuckey 2015) that pits technology and civilization against trickery and savagery. While drones present the appearance of a kind of “objective warfare,” freed from the mire of individual emotion and peril, they are nonetheless embedded within framings of counterterrorism that “Other” the enemy to the point of dehumanization.

Though drones, more formally known as UAVs, have been in development since the early 1900’s, their use in combat is most often associated with the Global War on Terror. Armed drones are most commonly utilized in targeted killing campaigns, pre-emptive strikes intended to eliminate terrorists and terrorist resources before they can be utilized in an attack. Since the attacks of 9/11/2001, the United States has carried out drone attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. (Currier 2013) UAVs have largely retained popular and political support in the United States, likely due to their perceived effectiveness and lack of risk to service personnel. (Horowitz 2020) However, despite its apparent precision, drone warfare has not eliminated the risk of civilian deaths. The Obama administration conducted 563 (primarily UAV) strikes across Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, resulting in between 384 and 807 civilian deaths. (Purkiss and Serle 2017) As recently as August 2021, a US drone strike intended for Taliban militants instead killed 10 Afghan civilians, including 7 children. (Romo 2021) The use of UAVs in combat has faced a variety of ethical challenges, most of which center around the morality of what is effectively assassination from extreme distance. In marrying the visual language of the drone and the aircraft carrier through the helicarrier, *Captain*

America: Winter Soldier positions HYDRA as an embodiment of the mechanized, morally ambiguous aspects of the Global War on Terror.

However, the helicarriers in *Winter Soldier* are not only mobile aircraft and weapons platforms. They are also integrated with an advanced intelligence-gathering algorithm designed to assess and pre-empt terrorist threats, codenamed project Insight. In practice, Insight-equipped carriers deal with such threats with precisely directed munitions launched from a platform miles distant from and virtually invulnerable to the target, a clear parallel with the conduct of drone warfare. When introduced to the helicarriers, Captain America expresses uneasiness with project Insight's stated mission. This tension is outlined explicitly in a conversation between Rogers and Nick Fury, SHIELD's director. Fury states:

[Insight] satellites can read a terrorist's DNA before he steps outside his spider hole. We're gonna [sic] neutralize a lot of threats before they even happen... After [an alien attack on New York City], I convinced the World Security Council we needed a quantum surge in threat analysis. For once we're way ahead of the curve. (Russo & Russo 2014)

Rogers replies with immediate skepticism, characterizing Fury's plan as "holding a gun at everyone on Earth and calling it protection." Fury counters by pointing to the dubiousness of Cap's own origins as part of a clandestine human-enhancement program. Rogers demurs: "Yeah, we compromised. Sometimes in ways that made us not sleep so well. But we did it so the people could be free. This isn't freedom, this is fear." (Russo & Russo 2014). This scene sets up a clear dialectical tension between views towards military intervention. Cap is not necessarily skeptical of SHIELD's role in protecting the world through force; he participated in SHIELD's defense of New York (*The Avengers* 2012) and continued to operate with SHIELD afterwards. Rogers instead objects to

military intervention as pre-emptive killing, a philosophy of war embodied by the helicarriers' intermeshing of drone and aircraft carrier. *Winter Soldier* effectively uses the tension between Fury and Cap's conceptions of warfare, and SHIELD's role within it, to grapple with culturally embedded understandings of just war per Thomas Aquinas. (Reichberg 2017) Though the film acknowledges that war always entails some degree of moral ambiguity, it nonetheless suggests that war conducted in a particular way with the right motivation can be, if not good, necessary.

Rogers and his allies ultimately discover that Insight was secretly a HYDRA initiative from the outset, HYDRA having infiltrated SHIELD shortly after WWII. HYDRA plans to utilize the carriers in a massive genocide campaign, targeting and killing anyone who might pose a threat to total HYDRA control. Rogers and his allies, including Wilson, Fury, and Romanov, conclude that the only way to stop HYDRA entirely is to destroy the helicarriers and SHIELD itself. In the film's final act, HYDRA nearly succeeds in enacting their plans, with semi-diegetic computer overlays showing targeting systems homing in on hundreds of thousands of individuals across the world. These displays overtly mirror the visual language of drone warfare, as does the general premise of pre-emptive violence enacted from extreme distance. Captain America, Falcon, Black Widow, and a handful of defecting SHIELD agents are able to reprogram the carriers to destroy each other, stopping HYDRA's plans and saving countless innocent lives. However, Rogers and co. are now forced to contend with a new set of realities: SHIELD's own defense apparatus nearly acted as tools of global genocide, and SHIELD itself has proven vulnerable to deep infiltration by the threats it was created to counter.

Winter Soldier concludes by effectively burying the remnants of SHIELD. Black Widow, having publicized classified information, testifies before Congress to defend her actions in destroying what remained of SHIELD's security. She argues that, despite the role she, Captain America, and their SHIELD allies played in allowing HYDRA to flourish in secret, the world still needs exceptional individuals like her. Romanov states: "You're not gonna [sic] put any of us in a prison... because you need us. Yes, the world is a vulnerable place, and yes we helped make it that way. But we're also the ones best qualified to defend it." (Russo & Russo 2014) Though willing to condemn SHIELD's part (and her own) in endangering global safety, Black Widow and *Winter Soldier* as a whole both maintain the superhero soldier as the only effective counter to a vast existential threat.

Steve Rogers as Captain America represents a temporally and culturally idealized view of the soldier-archetype that maintains space for a humanized conception of American military intervention through the memory of WWII. He embodies the soldier-self (Pötzsch 2011) within a framework of war that pits just, necessary intervention directly against the soullessness of technological warfare, a framing which suggests that it is not our wars that are wrong, but the manner in which we conduct them. I reject this framing outright. The distance and dehumanization that drones provide is certainly part of the problem, as they feed frames of war through terministic screens of biolegitimacy and racialized, frontier violence. (Rowland 2016, Carney & Stuckey 2015) These, however, are not features of drone warfare exclusively, but components of a rhetoric of war that frames intervention in strictly binaristic terms. American imperialism in all of its forms relies upon constructions of just war that paint the enemy Other as ambiguously

omnipresent and threatening, and thus in need of rhetorical and physical containment through violence. *Winter Soldier*, despite the appearance of critique, does not reject these framings, but instead orients them around Captain America as a representational totem of the good war.

Less technology, or merely different technology, will not automatically make our wars more good, or their goals less imperialistic. To suggest so is patently absurd. *Winter Soldier* suggests a return to a moralistic frame of war that prizes freedom over security; where SHIELD and HYDRA represent order imposed by violence, Captain America represents freedom won through force. I contend that this is ultimately a meaningless distinction. Inasmuch as “security” and “freedom” stand as justifications for military intervention, both are equally capable of casting the same outcomes as necessary. American war rhetoric from Vietnam to Afghanistan has consistently hearkened to the need to defend freedom as much as to bring it to oppressed peoples. So-called “domino theory” (Parks Service, JFK Library) provided a crucial justification for American intervention in Vietnam and Indochina by proposing that, should Vietnam fall to Communist rule, neighboring states and their citizens would follow, a rationale steeped in security as much as nominal liberatory impulse. Similar justifications emerged in relation to Afghanistan, with President George W. Bush promising that “the oppressed people of Afghanistan” would be freed and benefitted by American intervention. (Bush Library) *Winter Soldier*’s proposed return to a moralistic framing of military intervention is a return to that which never left: America’s wars have always been valenced in terms of right and wrong.

Moreover, in orienting the morality of warfare through Captain America, *Winter Soldier* suggests a level of agency for soldiers and military personnel more broadly that does not exist. Steve Rogers largely represents himself as just another soldier, albeit an exceptional one. He understands his role within SHIELD through his experiences in WWII and struggles to come to terms with following orders he does not believe in. Though fantastical, Captain America's equipment represents a point of ideographic convergence with representations of combat-equipped infantry as we have examined in relation to *The Outpost* and *Generation Kill*. Even as his uniform (a blue jumpsuit with red and white stripes, with a white star at the center) and weapon (a round shield adorned with interlocking circles of red, white, and blue with a white star at the center) bear little resemblance to real-world military equipment, they signal Cap's role-as-soldier. As much as Steve Rogers may stand as an individual, Captain America as embodied in his star-spangled uniform is first identified with the military as a whole, an association reinforced by his friendship with the Falcon. This conflation, however, suggests that it is the role of *individuals* within the military to decide whether or not a war is worth fighting. If this is the return to moral military intervention that *Winter Soldier* suggests, it is untenable. Individual soldiers possess virtually no agency in deciding their nation's wars, nor are wars ever the product of a single person's will. Despite its skepticism towards technologization and the military-industrial influence, *Winter Soldier* fails to critique American imperialism because it fails to acknowledge its structures and outcomes as they exist in reality. What we are instead left with is an idealized conception of military intervention valenced through nostalgia for a man and a time that did not and do not exist.

Stars and Stripes: <Infantry> as Nostalgic Totem

If Captain America's enemies in *Winter Soldier* represent an amalgamation of the worst qualities of the Global War on Terror, then how Cap himself exists in relation to them bears close examination. *Winter Soldier*'s framing of the instruments of modern warfare reflects anxieties towards the use of combat drones and the expansion of the surveillance state. Though public opinion towards drone use has remained largely favorable in the United States (62% approval in 2013), global public opinion towards America's use of UAVs in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia trends strongly negative. (Drake 2013) Moreover, the expansion of surveillance powers in the US since 9/11 have led the Federal Government to indefinitely incarcerate and torture suspected terrorists without charges or trial, and to surveil, profile, and target Muslims based on their identity rather than any probable cause. (Amnesty International 2016) In positioning Captain America against hyper-drone aircraft carriers equipped with satellite intelligence feeds, *Winter Soldier* effectively pits Cap against the modern American war machine.

What remains unquestioned within the film, however, is Captain America's position as an unequivocally morally good actor. Nick Fury and Natasha Romanov were both involved in Project Insight before they became aware of HYDRA's involvement. Both conceal vital information about Insight from Cap, and both have to be convinced that SHIELD cannot be salvaged from HYDRA's influence. Rogers, however, is disconnected from the modern SHIELD both temporally and narratively. His argument with Nick Fury over the purpose of Project Insight demonstrates the moral divide between Cap's world and SHIELD's. Fury: "SHIELD takes the world as it is, not as we'd like it to be. And it's getting damn near past time for you to get with that program, Cap."

To which Rogers only replies, “Don’t hold your breath.” (Russo & Russo 2014) Rather than compromise his view of justified warfare to fit into the modern world, Rogers seeks a return to the simplicity of the age he left behind.

Throughout the film, Captain America is repeatedly characterized as a man out of time. In a conversation with his World War II love interest, Peggy Carter, Rogers expresses his disillusionment with the world he finds himself in. He muses, “For as long as I can remember I just wanted to do what was right. I guess I’m not quite sure what that is anymore. And I thought I could throw myself back in and follow orders, serve. It’s just not the same.” (Russo & Russo 2014) In expressing nostalgia for his World War II service, Cap sets up a clear division between the world he inhabited and the one he now inhabits. The War offered Steve Rogers the chance to serve his country in what he saw as a clear moral cause. The nebulous now, however, presents Rogers with moral ambiguities and unknowns that he cannot simply reconcile by following orders. What Cap longs for, and what the film seems to advocate for, is a return to grounding the use of military force in clear moral necessity.

Winter Soldier’s narrative positions Rogers himself as the solution to modern warfare’s quagmires, a framing echoed in public rhetorical constructions of WWII in the United States. Barbara Biesecker argues that reconstructions of WWII act as cross-generational “civics lessons.” that work to subsume current cultural fractures through reference to a unified view of the past. (2001) *Winter Soldier* makes this connection visually explicit through the image of Cap himself. In the lead-up to the final battle against the helicarriers, now controlled by HYDRA, Rogers finds himself in need of a uniform, his more modern suit being in possession of the HYDRA-controlled SHIELD.

The film then cuts to a shot of the Howling Commando exhibit at the Smithsonian, ostensibly dedicated to the exploits of Cap and his team during WWII. A security guard walks into the exhibit to discover that Captain America's WWII uniform has been stolen, and we see in the next scene that Rogers himself was the thief. (Russo & Russo 2014) If *Winter Soldier* positions Captain America against the apparatus of the Global War on Terror, then it does so with a clear awareness of Rogers' inextricable association with America's role in WWII. HYDRA themselves emerged as an arm of the Nazi war machine, though their associations with the actual precepts of Nazism are tenuous, if extant at all in the film. Captain America does not overcome this new iteration of HYDRA by integrating himself into the modern world. Rather, he destroys HYDRA and SHIELD both as representations of the modern world's failures. At *Winter Soldier's* conclusion, the most effective means to counter the existential threats of the modern age would appear to be a World War II soldier.

Such a framing is not unique to *Winter Soldier*, nor even to the character of Captain America. Steve Rogers, both within the MCU and in our own world, exists within a particular, culturally mediated understanding of WWII as a fight specifically against Nazism. Peter Ehrenhaus (2001) examines this orientation towards the war through the lens of *Saving Private Ryan*. Ehrenhaus argues that "*Saving Private Ryan* performs two functions of cultural memory simultaneously. It 'reillusions' American national identity even as it pays homage to the war sacrifices and accomplishments of 'the Greatest Generation.'" (2001) *Saving Private Ryan* grounds its depiction of WWII in the imagery of the Holocaust as a means of symbolic redemption for the sins of the Vietnam War. By suggesting that the United States entered WWII explicitly to combat

Nazism and fight the Holocaust, *Saving Private Ryan* (and works that participate in the same historical mediation) place the inherent moral ambiguity of killing in war against the backdrop of a grand, moral cause that hardly needs articulation. (Ehrenhaus 2001)

The moral rightness of fighting Nazis stands on its own.

Winter Soldier's characterization of Captain America draws upon the same process of historical reconstruction that Ehrenhaus outlines in *Private Ryan*. If anything, *Winter Soldier* takes much more of the cultural understanding surrounding WWII for granted than *Saving Private Ryan* does. Though we are told that they began as part of the Nazis, HYDRA's connections to the real Third Reich are tenuous, only reinforced by Rogers' own history fighting them. Nonetheless, we understand their evilness by association with the Nazis, their stated role in World War II, and Rogers' opposition to them. Pitting Captain America against the machinery of modern warfare inevitably places our understanding of the conflict into clear divisions between good and evil: if Cap is fighting them, we know they're the bad guys. What this construction presents, however, is a clear divisibility between a positive and negative kind of American military intervention. It suggests that in embracing war through machinery, America is on the path to losing its role as a global force for good. This pre-emptive mourning for "that which will have been lost" (Biesecker 2007) if HYDRA succeeds demands action just as the threat of terrorism did in the Global War on Terror. If we can only destroy our own HYDRAs and Project Insights, if we can tear down the drones and surveillance apparatus, then perhaps we can return to a time when the United States could see itself as the good guys. Unfortunately, I do not believe such a distinction can meaningfully exist.

“Hey Cap, how do we tell the good guys from the bad guys?”

My goal in examining *Captain America: Winter Soldier* has been to illustrate how a particular, nostalgic understanding of the Second World War is used to critique the conduct of the Global War on Terror. *Winter Soldier* positions Captain America as a totem of nostalgia for the Second World War in opposition to the cold impersonality of the Global War on Terror. In doing so, however, the film maintains the possibility for a moral brand of American military intervention through a symbolic return to the simplicity of World War II.

Such a return is not possible, because the past to which it would have us return never existed. It is not my intention to say that the United States was wrong to enter into World War II, nor that we were correct to. Rather, I hope to encourage a more critical view towards the totems of our past. While Captain America may embody the best qualities of the American soldier, he embodies *only* these qualities. He does not, however, wholly reflect the reality of the time he represents. The United States of WWII was one marred by racial segregation and animus. Nazi sympathies were not uncommon before the attack on Pearl Harbor, and many Americans initially saw the war as apart from American concerns. It was only after American territory was attacked directly that public sentiment began to unify around war. Thus, if *Winter Soldier* posits a return to the old world as a solution to the problems of the new one, I question whether this is any solution at all.

What *Winter Soldier* represents is a gross oversimplification of the problems undergirding American imperialism and military intervention. Our wars are not worthy of criticism merely because they are conducted with drones, nor is it within the power of

any given soldier to change or buck the structures that make such wars possible. In reducing the rightness or wrongness of intervention to a matter of personal conviction by individuals, *Winter Soldier* fails to contend with the reality of war at all. The image of Captain America as the star-spangled, superhuman hero-soldier embodies military personnel with a level of agency that they cannot possess within a binaristic moral framework that maintains the positioning of enemies as malevolent, amorphous Others.

As mentioned above, Captain America's function as a visual representation of military service is somewhat unique in that, though he is clearly defined as a soldier, he bears little physical or material resemblance to military personnel as they actually exist. Nonetheless, his past in WWII as well as his uniform and equipment ground Cap in the language of soldiering generally, a language we have examined thus far through more conventional renderings of <infantry>. Captain America represents a collective commitment to the best qualities of the United States, a commitment embodied clearly in his distinctiveness as a visual image. The stars and stripes present on his uniform and shield ground him in a pre-existing symbolic understanding which, combined with his own cultural pervasiveness as a mascot of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, allow him to function ideographically. (McGee 1989) However, unlike *The Outpost* and *Generation Kill*, Captain America's ideographic function in *Winter Soldier* exists within a world that resembles, but is not our own. Thus Cap's own resemblance to real-world soldiers, and his positioning in relation to structures and histories of war, reiterates frontierist frames of violence within the context of entertainment rather than even nominal critique. The ideographic function of <infantry> is not limited to overt depictions of war, but is embedded even within media directed towards popular consumption. Even when we are

not talking about our wars directly, American cultural consciousness post-9/11 ensures that we are never truly out of their shadow.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion: Informing Warfare

Summary of Analysis

Media does not exist as media alone. Everything that we consume is part of a constructed, carefully mediated social reality that shapes the ways in which we understand the world. Soldiers become martyrs and superheroes, while Others remain props against a colonialist backdrop, useful only to valence the experiences and morality of those in proximity to us. I have endeavored to show how *The Outpost*, *Generation Kill*, and *Captain America: Winter Soldier* embed their respective portrayals of American military action in rhetorical-cultural frames that reinscribe the necessity of imperialist warfare. By positioning <infantry> as a point of honorific support or admiration, these media elevate the American soldier as a redemptive construct, the “good man” through whom the rightness of a given cause is understood, if not enacted. To close, I wish to briefly reexamine my chosen artifacts as part of the broader cultural scope, and to ponder what questions my framing leaves unanswered.

The Outpost

Of my chosen media, *The Outpost* most clearly demonstrates the post-9/11 cultural frameworks I seek to illustrate. The Outpost provides little in the way of justification for the War in Afghanistan, instead relying on the audience’s pre-existing understanding of the war as a response to 9/11. It couches the language of military intervention in terms of directly protecting American lives and lifestyles, most explicitly

in exploring individual soldiers' motivations. Simultaneously, *The Outpost* conflates Afghan identity broadly with the Taliban, further reinforcing perceptions of Afghans as inherently Other and threatening, which in turn cements the necessity of American military intervention in containing their evil. Ultimately, such a framing almost entirely reinscribes frontierist notions of American imperial supremacy, both by couching Americans themselves in a position of absolute moral authority in relation to the savage, inhuman Other.

That such a framing elides meaningful critique of Imperialism should not be surprising. *The Outpost*'s construction of the War in Afghanistan, and the War on Terror more broadly, do little to dispel the notion that military intervention in Afghanistan was necessary, if poorly conducted. I do not wish to ascribe this outcome to any malicious intent on the part of the filmmakers, as available information indicates that their goal was primarily to memorialize the actions of the men at COP Keating. This, however, raises a question that I believe must be central to any examination of how our wars are framed: is it possible to honor the dead without valorizing the cause in which they participate?

Memorials, inadvertently or otherwise, bolster the necessity of Imperialism by grounding human losses within a larger collective effort. If these losses are to be regarded as more than senseless death, they must have been necessary in some sense to secure some higher good. We must believe that the price of freedom needs to be paid in human blood. Beyond providing the American public a means to grieve, memorials and memorializing media act as an on-ramp for the American Imperial machine. If our war-dead are honored for sacrificing their lives in service of a noble cause, there is little to prevent the onlooker from seeking the same honorific immortalization. As a memorial,

The Outpost positions the dead of COP Keating as selfless individuals who fought bravely to protect their country and their loved ones. As a recruiting tool, *The Outpost* positions the audience to join them.

Generation Kill

Though inarguably mediated, *Generation Kill*'s efforts toward authenticity complicate the public understanding of military service by displacing audience sympathy away from the collective effort. The marines of 1st Recon care little for why they are in Iraq, and are concerned primarily with ensuring that they survive. *Generation Kill*'s portrayal of marines and military service generally is far more cynical than that of *The Outpost*. Every marine in the show, officer or enlisted man, is subject to the same structures of control that rob them of their agency and sublimate their individuality into structures that ultimately accomplish nothing. Unfortunately, the show's emphasis on survival-as-mission and its extremely limited perspective cannot avoid centering the individual marine as an object of admiration.

Generation Kill succeeds in beginning to challenge the relationship between institutions of warfare and those embedded within them. The necessity of imperialism is much more difficult to sustain when its structures are inherently hypocritical; a positively-conceived collective commitment is nearly impossible when any liberatory impulse is overridden by glory-seeking officers. Where *Generation Kill* fails is in contextualizing what it shows. The experiences of 1st Recon are so ambiguously framed as to be practically isolated. They may be read as anti-war or anti-Imperialist, but only to the extent that the audience can frame them as such. This leads us back to the apocryphal

question posed by Truffaut: can there be such thing as an explicitly anti-war depiction of war?

The only answer that *Generation Kill* (or me, for that matter) is able to provide is a resounding “maybe.” It is possible that, properly situated among the diversity of perspectives, experiences, and personhoods that inhabit the post-9/11 world, *Generation Kill* could provide a holistic critique of the War in Iraq. As it stands, the show is far too limited in perspective to accomplish this. *Generation Kill*’s emphasis on individual experience is its greatest strength, as it permits an understanding of the War on Terror that is far from unequivocally praiseworthy. Its weakness, however, lies in the depoliticization that results. *Generation Kill*’s war can only be understood through the audience’s own existing orientation towards marines, Iraqis, and the violent spaces they inhabit. The suggestion, though never explicitly stated, is that if we as the audience wish to truly comprehend experiences of war, we must encounter them ourselves.

Captain America: Winter Soldier

Unlike *Outpost* and *Generation Kill*, *Winter Soldier* does not represent an existing war, or even an existing world. Its characters and events are grounded in a fictionalized America that resembles our own, but is clearly distinct. Despite this, its orientations towards soldiering and the role of military organizations cannot be fully divorced from the cultural backdrop against which they exist. Though explicitly valenced as entertainment, *Winter Soldier* nonetheless participates in constructing a particular worldview in which American military might can be productive of lasting good.

Captain America is representative of a period of American military history that is popularly regarded as unequivocally good. The Second World War, and Cap’s

associations with it, hearken to a time when divisions between right and wrong were clear, and suggest that such a moralistic framing can and should motivate military action in the present day. Pitting Captain American and his allies against enemies that strongly mirror our own defense and intelligence institutions implicitly contrasts the present state of depersonalized warfighting against a supposed past in which individuals rather than machines determined who the bad guys are. Though it exists as part of a multi-billion-dollar media empire explicitly aimed at popular entertainment, *Winter Soldier's* relationship to our military past raises a troubling question: when does entertainment become propaganda?

For my own part, I don't have an answer, nor do I believe that such a delineation can be cleanly made. Systems of media production and structures of American imperialism are so closely intertwined as to be inseparable, and the gestalt nature of post-9/11 cultural consciousness makes it difficult to tell where our wars begin and end. I am hesitant even to label *Winter Soldier* as explicitly propagandistic, as its fantastical setting and characters ensure that audience understanding of the film will be separated somewhat from their understanding of the world at large. What *Winter Soldier* makes clear is that the United States' relationship with our military ventures, both past and present, is under continual negotiation. Even in media that appears otherwise innocuous, there is an overwhelming urge to reassure ourselves that we were, are, and will continue to be the good guys.

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