

TERMINISTIC SCREENS AND PARTISAN AUDIENCES: A BURKEAN CLUSTER  
ANALYSIS OF CLINT EASTWOOD'S *AMERICAN SNIPER*

by

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## Abstract

After its 2014 release and box-office success, Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper*, a war film dramatizing the life of Navy Seal Chris Kyle, became a controversial picture for both conservative and liberal partisan audiences. The film, however, put forth a predominantly anti-war argument, depicting the futility of war and the damage it inflicts on both Americans and Iraqis. In this study I examined scenes and dialogue in the film, using Kenneth Burke's cluster analysis method, to explain the anti-war argument in the film. Further, I show how specific key terms resonate with partisan terministic screens, explaining the misreading of the film.

I discovered that the most significant key term in the film is Family, and its antithesis is War. Any terms that cluster around War, even terms meant to uphold Family, ultimately prove destructive to Family. The film relies heavily on showing how War destroys Family. However, I also discovered that what deflects the anti-war message for partisans is the character of Chris Kyle, a conservative who continually adheres to his right-wing ideology as justification for war until it almost destroys him and his family. This depiction of a conservative viewing the Iraq War as a black-and-white conflict between "good" and "evil" taps into conservative vocabularies and liberal vocabularies: conservatives identify with Kyle's language, and liberals abhor it. Both partisan audiences, through this selection, deflect the anti-war statement in the film.

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## Chapter 1: American Sniper Ignites Partisan Fervor

Clint Eastwood's Iraq War drama *American Sniper* made its mark at the end of 2014 when it became the single highest grossing war film in box office history. Grossing \$535.8 million worldwide (Lang, 2014; Box Office Mojo, 2015), it depicted the real-life struggles, both battlefield and home-front, of the late Navy Seal Chris Kyle. The film's financial and critical success, including six Academy Award nominations, made *Sniper* the center of media attention, both positive and negative. Borne from this attention was an unexpected controversy concerning the moral weight of *Sniper* as a political and ideological message. This controversy would soon be the defining feature of Eastwood's film.

Negative criticisms of *Sniper* began to appear on the Internet, such as in scholar Dennis Jett's column in *The New Republic*, and filmmaker Michael Moore's social media posts on his personal Twitter account. These partisan condemnations of the film and its director, tinged with language evoking politically liberal values, were attacked with equally hyper-partisan conservative responses from figures such as political pundit Sean Hannity, former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, and conservative actor Dean Cain (Lara, 2015; Charlton, 2015; Rouse, 2015). Notably, Republican Party officials used the film as a rallying cry for conservative politics, promoting it at political events (C. Burke, 2015; Weigel, 2015). Echoing celebrity disputes, general public discourse over the film grew quite vitriolic. In various Internet spaces, heated debates exposed passionate opinions and fiercely ideological language (Stelter, 2015). Two dogmatic types of *Sniper* criticism dominated the commentary: conservative praise and liberal condemnation. Of interest is that both partisan responses describe a movie that does not seem to exist.

*Sniper's* textual elements are nowhere near as politically conservative as it has been read by both partisan audiences. Eastwood instead concentrates on the flaws of Chris Kyle and the Iraq War and criticizes both. *Sniper* is predominantly an anti-war film in that it dramatizes the futility of war and the tragedy visited upon the families of soldiers. Eastwood also criticizes pro-war ideologies, and the conservative subscriptions to them. Of course, films can be read as polysemic texts that relay dual messages that are quite different, as argued in Rowland and Strain's (1994) case study of the Spike Lee film *Do the Right Thing*. However, there is no evidence that *Sniper* shows simultaneously dual messages of equal weight; nor is there any ambiguity in Eastwood's primary argument. Furthermore, Eastwood uses his film to dramatize the plight of war veterans, showing how the men and women who survive combat continue to fight an invisible war at home (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder). Eastwood is clearly arguing against war, and is critical of what it does to those sent to fight. Any evidence in support of *Sniper* as a pro-war, nationalistic, or propagandistic narrative is meager in comparison to the film's anti-war elements. Eastwood is not only critical of war and what it does to Americans, but also the resoundingly conservative ideology that perpetuates such tragedy.

The critical problem with the *American Sniper* phenomenon is the misreading of the film from both conservative and liberal partisan audiences. Despite the film making a predominant argument problematizing the Iraq War and what it does to those who fight, conservative partisan audiences misread the film as an endorsement of the Iraq War and conservative ideology. Liberal partisan audiences also misread *Sniper* as a film inappropriately celebrating, again, conservative politics. This consistent misreading is curious and demands explanation.

In this project, I will conduct an analysis of *American Sniper*, identifying key terms in the film and their relationship to each other in order to explain audience misreading of the film. I



will be guided by Kenneth Burke's (1937) injunction to identify "What goes with what and against what" (p. 20). I will then compare this pattern to liberal and conservative worldviews in order to explain the resonance and reactions to the films. I focus on liberals and conservatives because discourse on the film, particularly from bloggers and critics, were strikingly on partisan lines.

### Literature Review

I have divided literature relevant to this thesis into three categories: 1) rhetorical/scholarly analyses of the film; 2) film reviews; and 3) material on the responses of different political groups or individual partisans.

There is only a small body of scholarly textual analysis of *Sniper*. A LexisNexis Search reveals 999 reviews on the film – none of them scholarly. The dearth of scholarly studies on the film in focus leaves a significant gap in the literature. I have located only three rhetorical analyses of *Sniper*, and one deductive analysis by Hunter and Smith (2015) that adds little to this present study. Film reviews of *Sniper* from news/entertainment sources provide the most accessible insight into how the film works with audiences. These reviews, including the three textual analyses, as well as several scholarly reviews of the film, make up the first portion of this literature review. Material on responses from different political groups or individual partisans focuses on partisan narratives about the film that shed more light on *Sniper* as a polarizing phenomenon. These narratives evoke highly political language shedding light on the symbolic universes partisan audiences, both liberal and conservative, use to define *Sniper*.

I will start with the three scholarly publications on *Sniper*, following that with select news/entertainment reviews that elucidate the film's symbolic elements that resonate with partisan audiences.

*Textual Analyses of the Film*

Mikael Román (2015) analyzes *Sniper* for its themes of nationalism, mourning, and death. He focuses not on audience reception, nor on explanations of why audiences read the film as they may, but instead on *Sniper* as a flawed work – a text that reproduces what he terms *banal nationalism*, taken from Michael Billig's (1995) book of the same title. Billig (1995) defines this term as: "behavior and habits that enable Western nation-states to be reproduced [...] something that happens at a daily basis, where the nation is 'flagged' in different ways as a reminder for its citizens (and non-citizens)" (p. 13). In other words, Román (2015) argues that *Sniper* reinforces Western hegemony, while being complicit in stereotypically representing "the Other" [e.g., Middle Easterners, Muslims, non-white foreigners].

Tanguay (2015) also analyzes *Sniper*'s nationalistic elements. She focuses on tropes in these films: uses of/or representations of acts that evoke ideas of what she terms "good war" elements, or elements that evoke the "mythic charge" seen in World War II narratives, imbued with the "mythic summit of national virtue" (Tanguay, 2015). Using Bush's war rhetoric to define the nature of *Sniper*, Tanguay (2015) argues that the interpretation of the enemy in the "War on Terror" was an "Islamofascism," or merger of the "categorically evil Nazis" and the "savage, inscrutable subhuman" Japanese. This characterization of the enemy in this war is what, she argues, further define the protagonists as heroes in line with "victory culture" (Tanguay, 2015). In other words, the "heroes" are immersed in a "Wild West" scenario, conveying "a regressive and xenophobic nativism rather than the tolerance and openness ostensibly attacked on 9/11" (Tanguay, 2015). Ultimately, Tanguay (2015) argues that *Sniper* presents an ethnocentric and pro-war worldview [i.e., "good war"].

Bernard Beck (2015) provides an analysis of *Sniper* that focuses less on its problematic elements and more on how it rehabilitates the image of the heroic soldier. In his essay, he refers to *Sniper* as the climax of a series of “contemporary heroic war stor[ies]” (Beck, 2015). Further, he argues that *Sniper* runs in between the views of snipers as both “righteous patriots or heartless killers,” and that the film is quite unambiguous in its message that Kyle wants to serve his country unapologetically (Beck, 2015). He further argues that *Sniper* celebrates an “upbeat” military subculture: “[i]t is no secret that this movie was made to restore the story of the American armed services to an approved place in the American narrative” (Beck, 2015). Altogether, Beck (2015) argues that there are positive elements in *Sniper* used to rehabilitate a maligned subculture like military veterans, but he does not analyze the film explicitly to make his argument.

The above rhetorical analyses provide useful starting points to viewing *Sniper* as a text of strong symbolic resonance, but none of the studies answer the questions this thesis addresses, in particular how the film resonates with audiences. A few scholarly film reviews, however, identify elements in the film that do hint at audience resonance, and even address misreadings.

#### *Scholarly Film Reviews*

James Bolt (2015) argues that the controversy over *Sniper* is what makes it a significant film. He says that it “does not flirt with controversy – it’s married to it” and thus is “vaulted [...] to a higher platform than anyone could have anticipated.” He further details the partisanship of the controversy: “It is now a cultural divide – one cannot merely like or dislike the film without being labelled part of a larger group, of either bloodthirsty warmongers or spineless hippies” (Bolt, 2015). His film review echoes the very critical problem with *Sniper*, posing an apt question: “[W]ere all of these people watching the same film?” (Bolt, 2015). He describes the

film's elements as anti-war, and further ridicules the notion that *Sniper* is pro-war: "[I]s it a pro-war film that just happens to show how going to serve one's country can destroy families and relationships, and end up costing the soldier much more than they were expecting to lose?" (Bolt, 2015). In describing Kyle, Bolt (2015) claims: "Kyle is not the complete GI.Joe hero upon whom the plot is centred; he is a man with serious and damaging faults." Kyle is, thus, shown as a conservative who clings to his ideology fiercely: "Kyle is sure of himself and sure of his cause: he will protect his country from terrorists and will protect his fellow marines, no matter the cost to himself" (Bolt, 2015). Bolt (2015) sums up his review that Eastwood's argument is both anti-war and anti-conservative in the sense of criticizing the glamorization of war.

Rand Cooper (2015) reviews *Sniper* much like Bolt, showcasing both liberal attacks on the film for being pro-war/conservative propaganda, as well as the peculiarity of these attacks despite the contrary evidence in the film: "you can pick out a number of scenes in *Sniper* that challenge received notions of patriotism and a soldier's duty." Yet, he seems to agree with Román and Tanguay, arguing that the anti-war elements in the film are eclipsed by conservative tropes:

The problem is that these antiwar moments are allowed into a film the way a liberal is allowed onto Fox News – to state a mildly dissenting case before being overwhelmed by the other panelists. *Sniper* puts war critiques forward, only to blow them away with fusillades of patriotic invective. (Cooper, 2015)

In other words, Cooper points to Eastwood and his screenwriter, Jason Hall, as having failed to create a clearly anti-war film. He also argues that Eastwood makes an explicit political argument – which he alleges is weak when he presents the 9/11 attacks as Kyle's impetus for enlisting,

stating: “Whether Eastwood admits it or not, this sacralizing impulse [tying 9/11 to the Kyle story] discloses a political agenda” (Cooper, 2015).

Harvey Roy Greenberg (2015) echoes Bolt’s and Cooper’s detailing of *Sniper* as defined by its controversy, stating “[*Sniper*] has been immensely successful at the box office, but has drawn fire from the left because of its supposed repugnant jingoism.” Further, he draws attention to the responses as misreadings: “Neither facile liberal censure nor rabid applause from the right speak to Eastwood’s purposes in this superbly crafted picture” (Greenberg, 2015). He also details Eastwood’s anti-conservative argument in the presentation of Kyle’s upbringing by his strict father: “But a darker picture of the father emerges: father, mother, and Kyle and his brother sit around a kitchen table in tense silence while father declares his savage predatory take on the human condition” (Greenberg, 2015). As this upbringing molds Kyle into the man he becomes, Greenberg (2015) clearly points out that Eastwood’s presentation of these events in no way celebrates them – on the contrary, the director criticizes them: “Eastwood depicts [American servicepeople’s] skepticism [about fighting in the war] sparely and potently.” He highlights that although the anti-war elements in the film share less screen time than the more overt battle scenes or conservative ideological statements from Kyle, their rhetorical power is so “potent” that they far outweigh any purported “patriotic invective,” as argued by Cooper.

The above scholarly reviews of *Sniper* illustrate the film’s elements, including both the anti-war elements being misread, as well as arguments why misreadings occur. For some, like Cooper, the misreadings may not be misreadings at all, but instead failures on the part of Eastwood and screenwriter Hall to provide visible anti-war scenes. Although the list of scholarly and rhetorical analyses/reviews of *Sniper* are scant, news/entertainment reviews run the gamut, whether in praise or condemnation of the film.

*News/Entertainment Reviews*

Richard Brody (2014), for *The New Yorker*, reviews *Sniper* as an anti-war film particularly evocative of its director, whom he argues is attempting to deconstruct the war veteran:

Eastwood greatly admires, even reveres, the warrior, even as he hates war [...] because it's intrinsically destructive to warriors [...] He comes off as righteously angry at politicians who sent Chris into Iraq – not least for feeding him a false story about the national interest, which Chris swallows completely and which ratchets up his furious sense of protecting the American homeland from threats originating in Iraq. (Brody, 2014)

He characterizes the film as political “in the highest sense of the word,” implicitly indicting the state for its use and abuse of power (Brody, 2014).

Ty Burr (2015) of *The Boston Globe* is one of a few newspaper reviewers who argue that the film was widely misread by partisans, and further takes note of the political polarization of audiences. He argues that “because the movie has landed in the midst of a polarized cultural landscape, its message has been simplified and misunderstood on both sides of the divide” (Burr, 2015). Contrary to many criticisms against the film as stereotyping Iraqis, Burr (2015) argues that Eastwood is sympathetic to Iraqi civilians “and acknowledges – to a point – the trauma they sustained.” However, he also makes the point that Eastwood’s primary message is meant to be seen from the worldview of Kyle and his compatriots-in-arms; the dramatization of an experience that “anyone who wasn’t there [...] be they a [...] bloviator on the right or left – can never comprehend.” (Burr, 2015).

Lindy West's (2015) *The Guardian* review criticizes conservative misreadings of the film. However, she also discusses the ethics of filming the story of someone like Kyle, whose own morality is counter to what liberals value. In other words, she argues that there is a danger to filming the story of such a hyper-conservative like Kyle in that it may be misused by conservatives as celebratory while missing the bigger picture:

Much of the US right wing appears to have seized upon *American Sniper* with similarly shallow comprehension – treating it with the same unconsidered, rah-rah reverence that they would the national emblem or the flag itself [...] the film has been flattened into a symbol to serve the interests of an ideology that, arguably, runs counter to the ethos of the film itself. How much, if at all, should Eastwood concern himself with fans who misunderstand and misuse his work? (West, 2015)

West hits on the critical problem of this thesis in her review of both the film and conservative responses. In short, despite being an entertainment review, West provides one of the few analyses of *Sniper* that addresses its symbolic resonance with an audience.

Mark Hemingway (2015) of *The Weekly Standard* also provides a review that takes audiences into account, however briefly, arguing that the film focuses less on the political issues with the Iraq War [a liberal argument] and more on the heroism of soldiers fighting in it. However, he states that the film does not depict a black-and-white depiction of the war as “good versus evil”:

[I]t shows Kyle making genuinely difficult moral choices – such as killing a child before the boy can throw a grenade into the midst of Marines on patrol. And no one could accuse the film of failing to acknowledge the terrible mental and physical toll war takes on our soldiers.” (Hemingway, 2015)

Hemingway also claims there is hypocrisy in liberal audiences criticizing *Sniper* as pro-war:

The left has tried to avoid the anti-American stain it acquired in the Vietnam era by making sure to mouth platitudes about supporting the troops while criticizing the war. The reaction to *American Sniper* seems to suggest this pose is insincere. Either you're rooting for Kyle and his fellow soldiers or you're rooting for AQI [Al-Qaeda]. (Hemingway, 2015).

He argues that *Sniper* asks audiences to understand and empathize with the motivations of the American troops in the conflict, not to endorse an ideology (Hemingway, 2015).

*A.V. Club* reviewer Ignatiy Vishnevetsky (2014) reviews *Sniper* in terms of how it is representative of the kind of war film [conservative] audiences tend to misread: "It is also a tight, tensely staged modern-day war movie of the type that people tend to project their jingoism and xenophobia on to." He rejects arguments that Kyle's ideology and the film's message are the same, as well as arguments that the film inaccurately portrays what Lindy West (2015) calls a "hate-filled killer" (Vishnevetsky, 2014). Instead, he argues that though the film is indeed quite inaccurate in telling Kyle's true story, Eastwood forgoes accuracy for an anti-war message:

What it's trying for [...] is yet another variation on a story Eastwood seems to really enjoy telling, which is a story about a man – typically a conservative man, often scarred by some kind of fighting – who does some bad things in order to make a better world, of the kind where men like him would be rendered obsolete. These men are sometimes monsters – like *J. Edgar*'s J. Edgar Hoover, also a real-life figure – and they are approached with a mixture of ambivalence and sympathy. (Vishnevetsky, 2014)



He concludes his review stating that *Sniper* is a film that rejects the “true-false binary” in favor of a “complicated series of maybes and howevers” – a decision which may partly explain the vastly divergent misreadings toward the film (Vishnevetsky, 2014).

One of the topics at issue between partisan audiences is the term “hero,” particularly with the social media responses between liberal and conservative celebrities [e.g., Michael Moore, Sarah Palin]. *The Atlantic* writer Megan Garber (2015) reviews the film in terms of the problematic conceptions of war veterans as “heroes”:

As the war wears on, Kyle and his fellow SEALs begin sporting Punisher logos on their uniforms. Kyle becomes obsessed with killing his Iraqi-insurgent equivalent. A friend is injured on the battlefield. Kyle, visiting him in the hospital, promises: ‘You’re my brother, and they’re gonna fucking pay for what they did to you.’ Is that heroism? Does it matter? This is one problem, *American Sniper* suggests, with a culture that insists on treating ‘the troops’ as an anonymous collective: If everyone is a hero, then, heroes being what they are, nobody is. (Garber, 2015)

In short, Garber takes to task the culture that celebrates military servicepeople as heroes, particularly when contextualized with the problems that accompany the deeds these “heroes” commit in the name of “freedom.”

The above news/entertainment reviews showcase different issues with both the film, its director, the film’s audiences, and American war culture. The depictions in the film of this Iraq War story and its lead character, Kyle, are pointedly rejected by a swath of partisan entertainment reviewers, although some who do not reject it seem to provide explanations tinged with partisan reasons.

*Responses from Partisan Reviewers*

Partisan responses shed light on which symbols in the film evoke the strongest emotions. These responses come from a myriad of Web-based writers and celebrities, including political pundits, high-profile academics, and actors.

*Web-based writers*

*L.A. Times* film reviewer Amy Nicholson (2015) denounces *Sniper* based on what she argues is a lack of visible flaws on the part of Kyle's character: "The humble Kyle on screen is Kyle with his flaws written out. We're not watching a biopic. We're watching a drama about an idealized soldier, a patriot beyond reproach, which bolsters Kyle's legend while gutting the man." She further confounds the presentation of Kyle's ideology as Eastwood's endorsement of it: "Eastwood simply steps back and allows *American Sniper* to play like heartland bingo, in its opening minutes paying homage to guns, football, hunting, Bibles, Lone Star beer and rodeo cowboys" (Nicholson, 2015). In short, dramatizing conservative America is, to Nicholson, equivalent to celebrating it.

*Vox* writer Amanda Taub (2015) calls *Sniper* "a Hezbollah martyr video for the Fox News set; recruitment propaganda for culture-war extremists," where "heroes with guns are our only hope of salvation; and anyone who doubts that is part of the problem." She further defines the presentation of Kyle's father's strict conservative ideology as "[t]he movie's central metaphor," claiming that "[i]n the movie, Kyle is infallible," and that *Sniper* is a "Clint-Eastwood-directed warsploitation" film (Taub, 2015). Taub is onto something about Kyle's father's ideology as a central metaphor in the film. However, like Nicholson, Taub conflates the dramatization of such an ideology with the celebration of it.

*Salon* writer Sophia McClennen (2015) goes beyond the depiction of Kyle and his ideology: “In addition to sugarcoating Kyle, the film suffers from major myopia – from a complete inability to see the larger picture [...] Eastwood, and the troubling ways he represents a dark, disturbing feature of the GOP mind-set.” Further, she argues that the movie itself serves as sabotage for “any chance in our nation for political compromise and productive debate” (McClennen, 2015). In other words, *Sniper*’s depiction of conservative ideology makes the film dangerous to international relations.

*RollingStone* magazine’s political commentator Matt Taibbi (2015) criticizes the film for focusing on heroic soldiers and not policymakers:

The really dangerous part of this film is that it turns into a referendum on the character of a single soldier [...] and not about the Rumsfelds and Cheneys and other officials up the chain who put Kyle and his [...] rifle [...] in Iraq. (Taibbi, 2015)

Like McClennen, Taibbi (2015) criticizes *Sniper* for not including the political context of entering the Iraq War, regardless of the story centering on the experiences of Kyle and other American troops.

David French (2015) of the *National Review* gives a positive review of the film. Although he makes no mention that he is a conservative or veteran of the Iraq War himself, his review can be seen as exuding a knowledge of the war many do not know: “it tells a story that America isn’t told [...] showing how the enemy uses children, kills children, and savagely tortures its enemies (Kyle discovers a torture room in Fallujah, and its portrayal is very close to reality)” (French, 2015). He characterizes Kyle as a hero, but a different kind than the typically cinematized war hero:

No one is claiming Chris Kyle is Jesus. Every human being has flaws. And he risked no more and no less than the thousands upon thousands of anonymous soldiers and Marines who fought house-to-house during their own turns downrange, but he undeniably did his job better than any man who came before him [...] selfless service to our nation. (French, 2015)

French also adds that “I’m thankful my own son counts Chris Kyle as a hero” and “Leftists such as Michael Moore will rage on, and professors will judge the movie without seeing it” (French, 2015). French is critical of the liberal condemnations of the film – many of which concern what West (2015) noted in her review about conservative audiences who “[flatten the film] into a symbol to serve the interests of an ideology that, arguably, runs counter to the ethos of the film itself.” However, many of the liberal condemnations share this view not only because the film’s conservative audiences are pro-war, but because they view the film as a conservative, pro-war message itself.

#### *Partisan celebrity arguments*

One of the more catalyzing responses to *Sniper*, fueling much of the conservative blowback defending the film, is academic Dennis Jett’s (2015) opinion column in *The New Republic*, attacking the film despite having only viewed its trailer. He also took an excerpt from West’s review and appropriated it as another of his arguments: “The real American Sniper was a hate-filled killer. Why are simplistic patriots treating him as a hero?” (Jett, 2015; West, 2015). Jett was not the only academic to comment on Eastwood’s film. Noam Chomsky’s equally critical commentary on the film echoes Jett’s sentiment – that cinematizing Chris Kyle’s story is itself immoral because Kyle is immoral (Allon, 2015). Further, Chomsky is critical of nonpartisan reviews of the film for their praise. Using Kyle’s character to make his point,

Chomsky argues that when Kyle is shown judging his first sniper victim as a terrorist in a simplistic manner, it is “a mentality [that] helps explain why it’s so easy to ignore what is most clearly the most extreme terrorist campaign of modern history, if not ever – Obama’s global assassination campaign, the drone campaign” (Allon, 2015). These academics disagree not only with the film’s content, but the very act of filming what they deem immorality in both character [Kyle] and act [the Global War on Terrorism].

Michael Moore’s response to the film, a social media posting from his personal Twitter account, criticizes the immorality of Kyle’s job: “My uncle killed by sniper in WW2. We were taught snipers were cowards. Will shoot u in the back. Snipers aren’t heroes. And invaders r worse” (MMFlint, 2015). On the heels of Moore’s response, comedian Seth Rogen took to his Twitter account: “American Sniper kind of reminds me of the movie that’s showing in the third act of *Inglorious Basterds*” (sethrogen, 2015) – referring to a fictitious Nazi film glamorizing the killing of American troops by a Nazi sniper. Rogen’s point is that conservatives celebrating Kyle’s war feats are comparable to Nazi audiences celebrating the depicted killing of American soldiers. Documentarian Robert Greenwald reinforces this critique, stating that while viewing *Sniper* in the theaters, he actually did witness audience members cheering every time an Iraqi was killed by Kyle (Feldman, 2015).

Former Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean, in an interview on *Real Time, with Bill Maher*, called conservative fans of *Sniper* “angry,” and further said “I bet if you looked at the cross-section of the tea party and people who see this movie there’s a lot of intersection” (Ross, 2015). Maher criticized the notion of Kyle as a “hero” and lampooned conservatives who see him that way, sarcastically saying: “[H]e’s a psychopath patriot, and we love him” (Ross, 2015).

Conservative responses to liberal criticisms were quite harsh. Responding to Moore, political pundit Sean Hannity claimed: “Hey Michael, when snipers like Chris Kyle are saving AMERICAN lives, that would be a good thing. Even an idiot like U can get that” (seanhannity, 2015). Former Vice-Presidential nominee Sarah Palin not only blasted Moore and Rogen on her personal Facebook account, but she directed her attack at “Hollywood leftists,” starting with “God bless our troops,” before continuing:

[W]hile caressing shiny plastic trophies you exchange among one another while spitting on the graves of freedom fighters who allow you to do what you do, just realize the rest of America knows you’re not fit to shine Chris Kyle’s combat boots. (Sarah Palin, 2015)

Responding to Rogen, actor Dean Cain – also a friend of the Kyle family – tweeted: “Seth...I like your films, but right now, I wanna kick your ass. Chris is an American Hero. Period. Go to war. Then we’ll talk” (RealDeanCain, 2015). Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich tweeted: “Michael Moore should spend a few weeks with ISIS and Boko Haram. Then he might appreciate@AmericanSniper. I am proud of our defenders.” Country singer Blake Shelton (2015) tweeted “Proud to support our military.. Period. (blakeshelton, 2015), and later “Sickens me to see celebrities or anybody slam the very people who protect their right to talk shit..”

(blakeshelton, 2015). Responding to Rogen, country singer Craig Morgan posted on his Facebook page:

Kyle was a ‘Great American’ [...] You are fortunate to enjoy the privilege and freedom of working in and living in the United States, and saying whatever you want (regardless of how ignorant the statement) thanks to people like Chris Kyle. (Craig Morgan, 2015)

Responding to Jett, pundit Rush Limbaugh (2015) mocked liberal criticisms:

The primary criticism of *American Sniper* ran in the *New Republic*, and it's what's feeding all the other criticism [...] It's everything Hollywood hates: Rednecks, Texas, guns. Add to it war, Iraq? 'Wrong, immoral, because of Bush. What's the guy doing? Killing innocent Iraqis, a murderer!' (Limbaugh, 2015)

In the aforementioned interview on *Real Time, with Bill Maher*, Bret Stephens of the *Wall Street Journal* claimed, "It was not just about war, it was about PTSD, it was about what the wives of soldiers go through," and "I can't believe you [Maher and Dean] came away with that impression of the film" (Ross, 2015). In a *Fox News Channel* interview, conservative columnist Todd Starnes (2015) stated he longed for the days when "Hollywood stood in solidarity with our fighting men and women [...] Those days are long gone [...] soiled by the stinking stench of Michael Moore and Howard Dean and their liberal minions." Responding to Robert Greenwald's criticism, former Congressman and war veteran Patrick Murphy claimed that the documentarian was not considering how *Sniper* humanized Iraqis who worked with Americans to stop "the real enemy" (Feldman, 2015).

Overall, the many conservative celebrity responses imply that criticisms of *Sniper* and Chris Kyle are equally criticisms of all servicepeople and, hence, are unpatriotic. This view is predicated on the notion that Kyle is a hero.

### *Summary*

Much of the literature reviewed here does not focus on the critical problem of *Sniper* being misread by partisan audiences. However, it does provide useful information that can be built upon in this study. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to the relevant literature on the film's rhetorical power through its audiences. To make this argument, I will explain why themes in *Sniper* resonate with partisan audiences using Kenneth Burke's description of

*terministic screens*. I will use Burke's *cluster analysis* method to chart key terms in the film and explain why they tap into partisan terministic screens. In short, to make this argument, I will (1) describe the Burkean cluster analysis; (2) briefly discuss terministic screens; and (3) present how I will use the cluster analysis method in my plan of study.

### Methodology and Scope

A cluster analysis concentrates on “vocabularies or clusters of terms that a group utilizes in making sense out of events” (Gusfield, 1989, p. 13). First discussed in Burke's (1937) *Attitudes Toward History*, clustering refers to how certain terms stick to other terms (p. 232). In *Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke (1957) presents two kinds of clustering: associational – *what goes with what*; and oppositional – *what goes against what* (p. 20). Unfortunately, Burke's explanation of the process remains ambiguous at best, leading to various interpretations and expansions of the method.

Berthold (1976) elaborates on the cluster analysis using a process involving both cluster and *agon analysis*, or, as Rueckert (1963) explains, revealing terms in opposition to each other (e.g., *what goes against what*) (p. 86). In the cluster analysis, the critic locates key terms, arriving at a “god term,” or the ultimate term used to rank subordinate terms associated with it. In turn, “devil terms” that run counter to god terms can be located as well. The critic lists all contexts of the use of terms, as well as associational links (Berthold, 1976). Conducting the agon analysis is done in the same manner, although the focus is looking for what goes against what, not with what (Berthold, 1976). Following the charting of all relevant clusters and agons, the critic interprets the links and explains their meaning. Other scholars have used similar approaches as Berthold. Foss (1984) explicates clustering through a three-step process: (1) identifying key terms; (2) charting the terms that cluster around key terms; and (3) determining



and explaining the connection (p. 72). Lynch (2006) uses a four-step cluster analysis, but his approach is quite similar to Foss' three-step process.

In short, clusters of terms can be defined by how they associate and how they oppose. Determining the clusters in *Sniper* helps define symbolic resonance of key terms. Associational or oppositional clusters tap into one's symbolic universe, and therefore terministic screens.

In a brief description, terministic screens account for how one uses a personal "filter" to direct attention toward specific details in a message that resonates with their worldview. Burke (1957) explains this as: "Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality" (p. 4). The receiver of a message, through using their terministic filter, engages in *reflection/selection/deflection* in order to read that message. Hence, terministic screens help account for how someone reads, or in the case of *Sniper*, misreads, a rhetorical work. I use terministic screens because Burke's writings on symbolic resonance and terminologies lend well to this project, providing a helpful avenue to understand how symbolic elements in the film resonate with partisan audiences. The analysis of the film's background, and the previous discussions of the dominant readings of the film by conservatives and liberals, suggests a strong role of ideology in the resonance of the film. Therefore, I will focus on partisan terministic screens by developing them through Burke's writings. Further, I will present various studies on partisan vocabularies that make up liberal and conservative terministic screens. I then will show how the film taps into these liberal and conservative terministic screens that produce the reactions described earlier.

In this analysis, I will adopt a three-step approach similar to both Foss' and Lynch's previous work. First, I will identify the important key terms in *Sniper* and rank them according to

their frequency of appearance and/or intensity/power (e.g., ideological resonance). Next, I will look for different clusters/agons of terms that provide associational consistency and/or symbolic conflict. Finally, I will explain how these clusters/agons resonate with liberal and conservative terministic screens. Using the cluster analysis, I will compare key terms to the terministic screens that define contemporary liberalism and conservatism. This will entail categorizing specific scenes and acts according to how their symbols tap into terministic screens. A scene depicting combat violence and the terms that cluster around it may tap into conservative screens and evoke identification with American warriors; the same scene for liberals may evoke dissociation or rejection. These clusters in the film, I argue, produce conservative praise and liberal condemnation.

#### Plan of Study

Chapter Two, “The Partisan Terministic Screen,” will develop the idea of terministic screens. Citing several of Burke’s seminal works, I will describe in detail how terministic screens function. Further, using political science, political psychology, and communication studies, I will flesh out conservative and liberal terminologies. In a way, I am concretizing partisan terministic screens – illustrating what they look like through their vocabularies.

Chapter Three, “*American Sniper* and Its Ideological Resonance,” is a textual analysis of the film. I will go about this by providing a brief summary of the movie; and then explain how it serves as an anti-war argument. I then will identify key terms in the film using a cluster analysis. I then will show how elements in the film linked to conservative and liberal terministic screens explain the resonance of the film with both audiences.

Chapter Four, “What *American Sniper* Says About Today,” will summarize the argument, and discuss implications of the findings for today’s strongly polarized political universe. This

research may explain how liberal and conservative audiences today respond to ideological narrative.

## Chapter Two: The Partisan Terministic Screen

The purpose of this chapter is to develop the terministic screens at work in partisan audiences misreading *American Sniper*. I provide a brief summary of Kenneth Burke's explanations of terministic screens, as well as further studies expounding on his work: Bernard Brock, Mark Huglen, James Klumpp, and Sharon Howell's use of Burke's explication of the political lens in *Making Sense of Political Ideology: The Power of Language in Democracy*. In addition, I use Jonathan Haidt's political psychology writings on ideological morality to help better illustrate partisan worldviews, and the publications of Sam Tanenhaus, Geoffrey Nunberg, and Michael McGee for their work on ideological language and "symbol-words." Drew Westen's studies on ideology as narrative, and John Jones' and Robert Rowland's essay exploring ideological vocabulary in the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan are also used, as well as George Lakoff's metaphorical approach to defining ideological components.

### Kenneth Burke and the Terministic Screen

#### *Identification/Consubstantiality*

I begin with identification. For Burke, identification is the communicative process that creates unity among those who share common interests. He further terms this identification as *consubstantiality*, or joined and separate: "To identify A with B is to make A consubstantial with B. It is being together but being apart" (Burke, 1950, p. 21). When you identify with another, you become consubstantial with that person. There is unification, but still some level of distinction. For example, in the act of communion for a Protestant, where one partakes of a sacrament to symbolize unity with the body of Christ, the Protestant who does so does not believe they are literally one with Christ. The partaking of communion instead achieves a

symbolic one-ness. In contrast, Catholics see communion as a literal merger with Christ through partaking of sacrament.

As part of the New Rhetoric movement, Burke argues that the deliberate design of symbolic action to persuade others involves identification. In other words, Burke argues that the study of persuasion should focus on the *Symbolic* – not the deliberate design of symbols, but the conscious and non-conscious ways symbols act on people to create a sense of identity:

[W]e might as well keep it in mind that a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests. (Burke, 1950, p. 46)

Burke (1950) further argues that consubstantiality, whether explicit or implicit, is necessary to one's way of life: "men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*" (p. 21). Hence, being persuaded is identifying with something – this is consubstantiality. He also notes that identification can happen without conscious direction:

The thought of self-deception brings up another range of possibilities here. For there is a wide range of ways whereby the rhetorical motive, through the resources of identification, can operate without conscious direction by any particular agent [...] one can systematically extend the range of rhetoric, if one studies the persuasiveness of false or inadequate terms which may not be directly imposed upon us from without by some skillful speaker, but which we impose upon ourselves, in varying degrees of deliberateness and unawareness, through motives indeterminately self-protective and/or suicidal. (Burke, 1950, p. 35)

In other words, people can direct their *own* attention, whether consciously or non-consciously, in ways that evade an argument or clear message. Whether it is the deliberate or non-deliberate

misreading of a film like *Sniper*, or any political argument, the way people use their own terminologies to forge certain identifications guides the way they accept and/or reject clear messages.

Further, to understand terministic screens is to understand not only the identification for a person behind their screen, but also the *division*: what that person identifies with also reveals what they do *not* identify with, or divide themselves from. In an active terministic screen, the action of division is a *deflection*, where, for Burke (1966), “the kind of action in mind concerns simply the fact that any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others” (p. 46). What determines which channel depends on the message receiver’s vocabulary – the symbols and terminology that they identify with. As previously stated in Chapter 1, Burke argues that:

Men seek for vocabularies that are reflections of [their] reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality. (Burke, 1957, p. 4)

In other words, people often use terministic screens to strike out components of a message that are inconsistent with that screen. The result can be a misreading of the original message. This striking-out can happen non-consciously as well as consciously.

For Burke (1950), using terministic screens is part of how people use rhetoric, for it “deals with the possibilities of classification in its *partisan* aspects,” or how people identify “with groups more or less at odds with one another” (p. 22). This leads to socialization and faction (Burke, 1950, p. 45). Burke (1966) states that terms come in two forms: “terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart” (p. 49). How these terminologies come to being

depends on how they *reflect* the reality and how they act as “a *selection* of reality” (Burke, 1966, p. 45).

Overall, the way people communicate is through terministic screens – for “we *must* use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms” (Burke, 1966, p. 50). I argue later that terministic screens of partisans lead to consistent deflection of the message in *American Sniper*.

#### Ideology: Conservative and Liberal Positions

In their book *Making Sense of Political Ideology: The Power of Language in Democracy*, Brock, Huglen, Klumpp, and Howell (2005) argue that “[i]deology provides the structures of understanding that unite disparate citizens in effective political action” (p. 30). Referring to Burke’s cluster analysis, Brock et al. (2005) introduce political motives/frames as “clusters of vocabulary and uses of that vocabulary that motivate political actors and actions” (p. 45). Where partisanship is concerned, they use Burke’s (1937) description of political communication:

[I]n a complex world, there are many kinds of action. Action requires programs – programs require vocabulary. To act wisely, in concert, we must use many words. If we use the wrong words, words that divide up the field inadequately, we obey false cues. We must name the friendly or unfriendly functions and relationships in such a way that we are able to do something about them. In naming them, we form our characters, since the names embody attitudes; and implicit in the attitudes there are the cues of behavior. (p. 45-46)

Thus, the clusters of words/vocabulary in political language, whether “right” or “wrong,” “shape our relations [...] prepare us *for* some functions and *against* others, *for* or *against* the persons representing these functions” (Burke, 1937, p. 4-5). Another way of viewing these vocabularies

is what Richard Rorty (1989) calls a “final vocabulary,” or the words that show how “far [...] we can go with language” (p. 73). He added that “[a]ll human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies” (p. 73). How partisans define and identify with certain functions depends on their terministic screens.

### *Conservative and Liberal Vocabularies*

Using the theories of both Shweder and Durkheim, Haidt (2012) explores political ideology through explicating “triggers,” or variables that affect what he calls a *moral module* (p. 123-124). A moral module is one’s “interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate self-interest and make cooperative societies possible” (Haidt, 2012, p. 270). A liberal’s moral module is triggered by judgments of cruelty and oppression, whereas a conservative’s moral module is triggered by judgments about proper enforcement of rules, particularly about respect for authority figures like parents and teachers (Haidt, 2012, p. 124). Haidt concentrates on six *moral foundations* to determine what values resonate in the moral modules of both conservatives and liberals: 1) Care/harm; 2) Fairness/cheating; 3) Loyalty/betrayal; 4) Authority/subversion; 5) Sanctity/degradation; and 6) Liberty/oppression (p. 125; 169). Overall, the most consistent partisan differences lie with Loyalty/betrayal, Authority/subversion, and Sanctity/degradation (Haidt, 2012, p. 183-184). The first three foundations (Care/harm; Fairness/cheating; and Loyalty/betrayal) greatly trigger liberal moral systems, but the other three do not as much – liberals are particularly ambivalent about Authority/subversion and Sanctity/degradation (Haidt, 2012, p. 183-184). Conservatives use all six foundations, although they are more willing to sacrifice Care/harm – to “let some people get



hurt in order to achieve their many other moral objectives” (Haidt, 2012, p. 184). Overall, Haidt argues that principles and the priority of certain ones over others are useful ways of distinguishing between conservatives and liberals.

“Core” or “basic” principles are the foundation of what Sam Tanenhaus (2009) argues is the difference between conservatives and liberals (p. 7). Tanenhaus (2008) argues that conservatives “prefer arguments built on [...] principles,” while liberals are “inclined in recent decades to pragmatism.” What these principles are, according to Geoffrey Nunberg (2006), can be seen in terms like “[p]atriotism, values, elite, traditional, faith, ownership” (p. 201). Reflecting Rorty’s notion of final vocabularies, Nunberg (2006) explicates how vocabularies “evoke,” or “draw their power from their ability to call up scenarios, images, or moral tales” (p. 28). When vocabularies, whether conservative or liberal, guide partisans in public discourse, they become that person’s “political symbol” for action (Nunberg, 2006, p. 29). These “symbol-words of political discourse” (Nunberg, 2006, p. 30) are equivalent to what Michael McGee (1980) calls “ideographs,” or value-laden words that serve as “building blocks” of ideology. These words not only “encapsulate a particular issue, candidate, or trend [but] [t]hey tell us *how* those specific symbols signify, so that we can group them as episodes in a grander political narrative that we evoke over and over again” (Nunberg, 2006, p. 30-31). In short, vocabularies matter, but the values in certain words give vocabularies their ideological meaning.

Westen (2007) focuses not only on words, but also the narratives they create, specifically what he calls *master narratives* and how they signify political ideology (p. 150). He argues that ideology is built around these master narratives (Westen, 2007, p. 150-151). Westen (2007) argues that conservatives have historically used to great effect master narratives. One such example comes from Ronald Reagan’s 1984 reelection campaign:

We believe in the uniqueness of each individual. We believe in the sacredness of human life. For some time now we've all fallen into a pattern of describing our choice as left or right [...] But is that really an accurate description of the choice before us? Isn't our choice really not one of left or right, but of up or down? Down through the welfare state to statism, to more and more government largesse accompanied always by more government authority, less individual liberty and, ultimately, totalitarianism, always advanced as for our own good. The alternative is the dream conceived by our Founding Fathers, up to the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with an orderly society.

(Westen, 2007, p. 156)

It is important to observe the clusters of value-terms incorporated in Reagan's rhetoric:

"individual freedom," "orderly society," "sacredness of human life," and "uniqueness of each individual." These clusters create not only a vocabulary to be reflected/selected, but also a master narrative that "feel[s] to the majority of Americans like *their* story" (Westen, 2007, p. 165).

Jones and Rowland (2015) expand the understanding of narratives and political ideology to show how oratory can achieve ideological ends, specifically Reagan's use of a liberal vocabulary to achieve conservative policy. Using the notion of liberals supporting pragmatic policies and conservatives supporting political principles, Jones and Rowland (2015) show how Reagan used conservative principles, such as the cluster that "government is the problem," and also used liberal pragmatic views. In other words, he "talked like a liberal while supporting conservative policies" (Jones & Rowland, 2015). He further used liberal terms such as "provide opportunity" and "foster productivity" in relation to the government helping Americans:

Now, so there will be no misunderstanding, it's not my intention to do away with government. It is rather to make it work – work with us, not over us; to stand by our side,

not ride on our back. Government can and must provide opportunity, not smother it; foster productivity, not stifle it. (Reagan, 1981)

Here is another example of Reagan using a liberal vocabulary to achieve conservative policy:

Well, this administration's objective will be a healthy, vigorous, growing economy that provides equal opportunities for all Americans with no barriers born of bigotry or discrimination. Putting America back to work means putting all Americans back to work. Ending inflation means freeing all Americans from the terror of runaway living costs. All must share in the productive work of this 'new beginning,' and all must share in the bounty of a revived economy. (Reagan, 1981)

Jones and Rowland (2015) show how Reagan used both liberal and conservative terminologies to win public support for his policies.

Another way of pinpointing a liberal or conservative screen is through a terminology's metaphoric power. Lakoff (1996) breaks down the positions of conservative and liberal in metaphorical terms (p. 14). He argues that both dominant political worldviews are constructed according to the "Family-as-Metaphor" (Lakoff, 1996, p. 14). Lakoff (1996) argues that the family metaphor that encapsulates the American worldview is the "Nation-as-Family" (p. 13). The framework for how families construct their Nation-as-Family is split into two different models: the Strict Father Model [SFM] for conservatives and the Nurturant Parent Model [NPM] for liberals (Lakoff, 1996, p. 13). The NPM consists of a family of either a single parent or two parents, where in two-parent households *both* parents share domestic responsibilities (Lakoff, 1996, p. 108). The SFM observes a strict hierarchy of gender roles in the family – the father is the head, the mother the subordinate (Lakoff, 1996, p. 66). Lakoff (1996) argues that in the SFM, dominance equals moral authority, where discipline creates ideal children to become ideal adults

(p. 66). From the perspective of the SFM, the world is a dangerous place (Lakoff, 1996, p. 66), made so by the absolute presence of an “Evil” (Lakoff, 1996, p. 109).

Lakoff (1996) also stresses the importance of vocabularies in each worldview (p. 30). He offers an example of a conservative vocabulary:

Here are some words and phrases used over and over in conservative discourse:

character, virtue, discipline, tough it out, get tough, tough love, strong, self-reliance, individual responsibility, backbone, standards, authority, heritage, competition, earn, hard work, enterprise, property rights, reward, freedom, intrusion, interference, meddling, punishment, human nature, traditional, common sense, dependency, self-indulgent, elite, quotas, breakdown, corrupt, decay, rot, degenerate, deviant, lifestyle. (Lakoff, 1996, p. 30)

The liberal vocabulary is quite different:

Liberals talk about: social forces, social responsibility, free expression, human rights, equal rights, concern, care, help, health, safety, nutrition, basic human dignity, oppression, diversity, deprivation, alienation, big corporations, corporate welfare, ecology, ecosystem, biodiversity, pollution, and so on. (Lakoff, 1996, p. 30-31)

Lakoff (1996) further argues that conservatives tend not to dwell on liberal terminology, or to use these words as part of their normal political discourse (p. 31). These vocabularies provide a means to understand how political partisans understand the world.

### *Liberal and Conservative Terministic Screens*

In conclusion, a fleshed out conservative terministic screen is made up of terms such as: fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, liberty/oppression, patriotism, values, elite, traditional, faith, ownership, individual liberty, individual freedom,

orderly society, human life, uniqueness of each individual, evil, character, virtue, discipline, tough it out, get tough, tough love, strong, self-reliance, individual responsibility, backbone, standards, authority, heritage, competition, earn, hard work, enterprise, property rights, reward, freedom, intrusion, interference, meddling, punishment, human nature, traditional, common sense, dependency, self-indulgent, quotas, breakdown, corrupt, decay, rot, degenerate, deviant, lifestyle (Haidt, 2012, p. 183-184; Nunberg, 2006, p. 201; Westen, 2007, p. 156; Lakoff, 1996, p. 30).

A liberal terministic screen is made up of terms such as: Care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, pragmatic, government for us, provide opportunity, equal opportunity, bigotry, discrimination, share, gender equality, social forces, social responsibility, free expression, human rights, equal rights, concern, care, help, health, safety, nutrition, basic human dignity, oppression, diversity, deprivation, alienation, big corporations, corporate welfare, ecology, ecosystem, biodiversity, pollution (Haidt, 2012, p. 183-194; Tanenhaus, 2008; Jones & Rowland, 2015; Lakoff, 1996, p. 30-31).

Both terministic screens are triggered for the conservative or liberal when specific words, phrases, or scenes that evoke language consistent with the screen is encountered. This, I argue, is how conservatives and liberals misread *Sniper* so easily.

### Conclusion

Partisan terministic screens are guided by a political ideology. They rely on components like moral foundations, ideographs, narratives, principles, or metaphoric vocabularies in order to function. They also operate according to what linguistic “triggers” are encountered. These triggers may not only be linguistic, but also visual in action, such as film acts that evoke powerful cultural or moral values.

In the next chapter, I apply the illustrations of ideology and terministic screens to *Sniper*, analyzing the film's symbolic elements to find specific clusters, or key terms, that match with either conservative or liberal terministic screens.

### Chapter Three: *American Sniper* and Its Ideological Resonance

This chapter proceeds in four sections, beginning with a brief summary of *American Sniper*. Section Two is a cluster analysis of the key terms in the film, laying out the term Family as the most frequent and resonant term, or god term. Section Three is an agon analysis of clusters, including how War is a devil term to Family and how certain key terms that cluster around both War and Family shift in meaning. Section Four discusses how key term clustering explains conservative misreading of the film and liberal misreading of the film.

#### Film Summary

The film starts during the Iraq War with Kyle about to make his first sniper kill. The scene then shifts in a flashback to Kyle's childhood, learning to hunt with his father Wayne. When young Kyle successfully shoots his first deer under Wayne's tutelage, he drops his rifle in excitement and runs toward his kill. Wayne shouts "Get back here!" (Eastwood, Lorenz, Lazar, Cooper, & Morgan, 2014). As young Kyle stops, his father tells him in a commanding voice, "You don't ever leave your rifle in the dirt." (Eastwood et al., 2014). Young Kyle responds with a respectful "Yes, sir" (Eastwood et al., 2014). This response becomes typical of adult Kyle, no matter what male he addresses. From hunting to religion, Wayne directs his family toward a Christian life, as the film depicts them in church listening earnestly to their pastor's sermon. Young Kyle even takes a Bible in this scene, which he will carry with him throughout his adulthood, whether at home or in Iraq.

As a young adult, Kyle experiences failure at both rodeo performance and maintaining a relationship with his girlfriend. Prompted by news footage of U.S. embassy attacks by terrorists, he enlists in the Navy Seal program, eventually forging bonds with his fellow Seals in training, and meeting his future wife Taya on a night off. As Kyle and Taya explore their relationship, the

September 11 terrorist attacks disrupt their lives. Knowing that Kyle will be deployed to the Middle East, he and Taya marry. Thus begins the experience of war for both Kyle and Taya.

*Sniper* depicts four tours of duty in Iraq for Kyle. Eventually, the first scene of the film – Kyle about to make his first sniper kill – is revisited. This first kill, however, is problematic for him: a woman and her young son about to bomb U.S. Marines. Kyle makes the extremely difficult choice to shoot them before they kill U.S. troops. He is visibly shocked from what he has done. As his fellow Seal celebrates his two kills and pats Kyle on the back, Kyle quickly tells him “Get the fuck off me!” (Eastwood et al., 2014). Following this, Kyle doubles down on his job as a sniper, resulting in so many dead targets that he is dubbed by his compatriots “The Legend,” a moniker he shrugs off. Kyle also participates in clearing Iraqi civilian homes with Marines, where he meets a Sheikh and his family living in fear of terrorists who have disfigured their children for talking to Americans. Although Kyle promises the Sheikh that he and his family will be protected in exchange for intelligence on terrorist activity, the American contractors assigned to protect this family fail in doing so. The Sheikh and his young son are executed before Kyle can reach them in time. The terrorist executor, nicknamed “The Butcher,” takes a power drill to the boy’s temple. He then tells civilians in the area, in Arabic: “You talk to them, you die with them!” (Eastwood et al., 2014).

After his first tour in Iraq, Kyle returns home and suffers from the trauma experienced from failing to protect the Sheikh’s young son, hearing the sound of the power drill as he sits in silence in his living room. This affects Taya, immersing her in a struggle that Kyle refuses to discuss with her. His lack of attention to both her and his domestic responsibilities creates rifts that ultimately become critical for their family cohesion. These rifts worsen with each of Kyle’s tours of duty. He returns home each time more damaged, yet still resolute to continue fighting in



Iraq. He refuses to acknowledge that he is hurting his family, telling Taya, “I do it to protect you” (Eastwood et al., 2014). Before his final tour of duty, Taya presents Kyle an ultimatum of either choosing his family or the war. He eventually chooses the former, but only after experiencing a battle that nearly kills him and all his compatriots. In this battle, despite warnings to stand down from the opportunity to kill an enemy sniper, Kyle opts to take the shot. This shot alerts surrounding enemy insurgents of their whereabouts, leading to a last stand that would have killed all of them had it not been for a dust storm that provides cover for a perilous escape. Kyle not only quits the war after this battle, but leaves his rifle behind in the dirt.

Once home for good, Kyle is still consumed with both trauma and guilt over quitting the war. He seeks treatment from Veteran Affairs, and is presented with a valuable opportunity to continue helping in a post-war setting – assisting disabled war veterans. His counselor tells him, “We’ve got plenty of soldiers who need saving” (Eastwood et al., 2014). Kyle chooses this role, even using his celebrity status as “The Legend” to help others cope with post-war struggles. However, this ultimately leads to Kyle’s death. The film ends with titles reading that Kyle was killed by a veteran he was attempting to help. Real-life footage of Kyle’s funeral procession is shown – a 200-mile solemn parade from Arlington to Austin, TX, flanked by hundreds of people waving American flags. This is followed by end credits, playing without the use of a music score – a moment of silence.

#### Cluster Analysis of Key Terms

A close reading of the film reveals that a primary term or god term found permeating through the majority of scenes is Family. In *Sniper*, Family is evoked in three different ways for Kyle. First, one focus is the immediate, including the family he grows up with and the family he creates with Taya. Second, the Navy Seal brotherhood that Kyle identifies with in both training

and the war is a second form of family. Third, the film presents a metaphor of the nation as a family.

As a god term, Family works in different ways in the film. Family represents a foundation for defining Kyle's values and actions. Family is used in the building of that foundation, but also in defending that foundation from threats. Family is also used in structuring how to plan (e.g., creating, sustaining, and defending) one's family. In addition, the term is used in notions of duty toward family: obligations and dedication as a priority in Kyle's life. Further, the film implies that rejecting duty is immoral, and negates Family.

There are several key terms that cluster around Family in the film. These clusters are associational, oppositional/agonistic, and both. When I say both, I mean that some terms shift in meaning throughout the film, where a term that is initially understood to cluster in one way switches throughout the film to another way.

Associational terms in *Sniper* that cluster with Family are: Home; Our own; Americans; Country; House; Life. Oppositional terms are: War; Evil; Enemy; Bad guys; Satan; Savages. Terms that shift in meaning in the film are: Protect/Save; Quit; Plan/Glory. I will develop the meaning of family by focusing on the terms associated with it and opposed to it and then show the evolution of how terms cluster.

### *Family-Home*

Of the associational key terms, "Home" is the most frequent and resonant, evoking many of the other associational terms, such as "Our own," "House," or "Country." For Kyle, home represents Family as a safe haven to come back to, a place of safety. In Kyle's case, he must keep the war out of his home and away from his family. During Kyle's first tour, there is a scene where he speaks to Taya on the phone, and she asks if he has killed anyone. He responds: "That

is not the way a call home is supposed to go, baby” (Eastwood et al., 2014). Kyle believes that talking to Taya – his family – about the war means involving her and their home in the war.

That, to Kyle, is a violation of home. The home is sacred, where war is not supposed to exist.

Home becomes problematic for Kyle after he meets the Sheikh and his family in Iraq. The meeting is a result of Kyle invading the home of the Sheikh; the meaning is articulated when the Sheikh pleads with Kyle: “This is my home!” and Kyle responds “I don’t give a fuck it’s your home, this is a war zone, sir!” (Eastwood et al., 2014). Kyle’s promise to protect them in exchange for money and information is jeopardized when American contractors fail to fulfill their duty to protect the family, leading to the killings of the Sheikh and his young boy. This experience follows Kyle back to Texas. He sits in solitude in his living room, Taya watching with concern, as the sound of the Butcher’s power drill killing the Sheikh’s young boy plays through his mind. Kyle may have thought that war does not belong in the home, but he has unexpectedly brought that war into his own home, involving Taya as well. In a way, he has contaminated his home with the horrors of war – a reality he will deny through silence and escape.

Kyle escapes through returning to Iraq, where to him it seems easier to avoid the collision of war and home. In other words, he does not have to contend with the reality of what war does to home and, hence, family. Instead, he can focus on fighting the war, on doubling down on his sniper task that he is quite skilled at. As Kyle returns to Iraq, walking on the tarmac, he unexpectedly runs into his brother Jeff with his Marine squadron as they board an airplane bound for home. This reunion of brothers sheds light on the problems with war and home, as Jeff is seen visibly shaken, traumatized from his own war experiences. He says “I’m going home,” but it is clear he has been damaged (Eastwood et al., 2014). In short, war has made it nearly

impossible to go home. Neither brothers factored in the after-effects of war when they signed up to fight. They were not prepared to bring the war back with them to their home.

During Kyle's final tour, when he takes the sniper shot that exposes his entire squadron to enemy insurgents, he puts them in a situation where death or capture for all is extremely likely. Expecting death at any moment, Kyle phones Taya. Voice shaking, he cries out to her "I'm ready to come home!" (Eastwood et al., 2014). When Kyle faces the reality of his potential death, the choice between Family and War is clear. He can either choose to keep ignoring his home and die in Iraq, or stop fighting for good and be with his family again.

The last time we hear "Home" evoked is when Kyle is back on U.S. soil, sitting in a bar, drinking alone. Taya calls him, surprised to find out that he is back in country, yet spending time away from home. She tells him to "come home," that their children miss him, that he has a family and a home waiting for him. He tells her, through tears, "I'm coming home" (Eastwood et al., 2014). In reality, Kyle is afraid of facing that home. Going home, again, is nearly impossible. However, Kyle seeks help from Veterans Affairs and copes with his trauma, finding redemption through assisting disabled veterans. His new mission extends Family to those who share the war/post-war experience that Kyle also experiences; they are now Veterans-as-Family. Through navigating these different versions of Family – Taya and his children, his fellow brethren-in-arms from the war, and now veterans – "Home" becomes clearer for Kyle.

#### *Shifting of Meaning Between Clusters and Agons*

"War" is the clear devil term of the film. Throughout all of Kyle's experiences in the Iraq War, the war itself becomes so destructive to his family and the people of Iraq that he must either stop fighting the war or lose his family. However, there are several key terms that

momentarily cluster around War in the first half of the film, but shift in meaning later. These terms are Protect, Plan, and Quit.

*Family-Protect & War-Protect*

“Protect” is a term that clusters around both Family and War. The first notion of protect introduced in *Sniper* is from Kyle’s father Wayne. He uses the term Protect in terms of protecting Family:

There are three types of people in this world: sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs. Some people prefer to believe that evil doesn’t exist in the world. And if it ever darkened their doorstep, they wouldn’t know how to protect themselves. Those are sheep. Then you’ve got predators, who use violence to prey on the weak. They’re the wolves. And then there are those blessed with the gift of aggression, an overpowering need to protect the flock. These men are the rare breed who live to confront the wolf. They are the sheepdog.

(Eastwood et al., 2014)

He finishes his life lesson telling his young sons “we protect our own” (Eastwood et al., 2014).

Protecting is what one does to defend Family from “wolves.”

The older Kyle, embracing his father’s sheepdog worldview, extends Family to the nation. He sees enemies against the United States as wolves, and he feels his calling is to protect the sheep of America from them. This is where “Protect” begins to cluster around War. As young men before the war, Kyle and his brother Jeff watch with concern news footage of terrorist attacks on U.S. embassies. Kyle responds with, “Look what they did to us” (Eastwood et al., 2014). Kyle as a sheepdog is prompted to defend “us” (i.e., the nation). In the very next scene, Kyle enlists in the Navy. Spurred by sheepdog notions of protecting, Kyle volunteers to protect his Nation-Family from Evil. He feels that war is a worthy course of action if the Nation-as-

Family needs protecting. Kyle justifies being a Seal to Taya, arguing it is because the U.S. is “the greatest country on Earth, and I’d do anything to protect it” (Eastwood et al., 2014).

Up to this point in the film, the term “Protect” clusters with War. As Kyle fights the war and experiences the reality of it, his notion of “Protect” becomes agonistic to Family. Eventually, Kyle learns that what he thinks he is protecting through war is not real. What is clear, however, is the damage he and the war have been inflicting on his own family. The shifts in the meaning of “Protect” are seen most visibly through Taya. When Kyle returns from his first tour of duty traumatized and silent, withholding his internal struggle from everyone around him, Taya tells him “You’re not protecting me by not talking about it” (Eastwood et al., 2014). Here, Taya’s dialogue shows that the key term “Protect,” when clustered with War, is anathema to Family. When Kyle responds with “I don’t want you getting that in your head [...] they’re savages!” (Eastwood et al., 2014), she reminds him that “It’s not about them. It’s about us” (Eastwood et al., 2014). She tells him that he has an actual family he is losing sight of due to the war. Before Kyle’s final tour of duty, Taya pleads with him to stop choosing the war over his family. When he brings up “Protect” again, “I do it to protect you” (Eastwood et al., 2014), Taya angrily disagrees in an emotional outpouring with statements like “Your family is here!” “Your children have no father!” and “I need you to be human again!” (Eastwood et al., 2014).

Overall, Taya’s multiple challenges to Kyle’s sheepdog notions of “Protect” show how war makes collateral damage of families. War-Protect is anathema to Family. War severs the link between family and protection. Any notion of protection through war is ultimately tragic to the family.

*Family-Plan & War-Plan*

The term “Plan” also clusters with Family before shifting to War and becoming agonistic to Family. The term is first linked to Family through a divine understanding, the notion of God’s plan. Young Kyle is raised to understand that Family is a foundation. Early in the film, he sits with his family in church, listening to their pastor’s sermon about God’s plan:

Here in the Book of Acts, several times Paul stands in judgment for what he believes. At times we all have to do that. I mean, we don’t see with His eyes, so we don’t know the glory of His plan. Our lives unfold before us like puzzling reflections in a mirror. But on the day we rise, we will see with clarity and understand the mystery of His ways.

(Eastwood et al., 2014)

This sermon shapes Kyle as he gets older, from pocketing a Bible from the pew during the same sermon and keeping it with him every day of his adulthood, to continually telling Taya “It’s all part of the plan” (Eastwood et al., 2014). Kyle sees himself as destined for greatness through God’s plan, but that greatness is a mystery, as “we don’t see with His eyes, so we don’t know the glory of His plan” (Eastwood et al., 2014). “Glory” becomes synonymous with “Plan.” Kyle must seek out glory; that is his plan. On his wedding day, when Taya tells him how nervous he looks, he tells her “You got nothing to be afraid of. It’s all part of the plan” (Eastwood et al., 2014). Here is where “Plan” clusters around War, where Kyle’s notion of glory is revealed to be through war. This, of course, becomes problematic for Family.

“Plan” as agonistic to Family is revealed at the funeral of Kyle’s fellow Seal, Marc Lee. Marc’s mother reads a poem that Marc had written prior to his death. Tear-stricken, she reads:

Glory. Something some men chase and others find themselves stumbling upon, not expecting to find them. Either way, it’s a noble gesture that one finds bestowed upon

them. My question is when does glory fade away and become a wrongful crusade, or an unjustified means by which consumes one completely? I've seen war, and I've seen death. (Eastwood et al., 2014)

After the funeral, Taya asks Kyle about the poem and if he knew about Marc writing it. Kyle responds that the poem contributed to Marc's death by clouding his judgment. Of course, Kyle finds out about the de-glorification of war Marc was referring to when he takes the final shot that exposes his squadron to almost certain death. Once Kyle takes the shot, he realizes that the fulfillment from the kill, an elusive sniper that Kyle has been after for the great majority of the film, does not happen. Not only does catharsis not come from his vengeful shot, but such revenge did nothing to protect his squadron; it did the opposite. His operating according to a plan of God and glory is revealed as his and his squadron's undoing. "Plan" is, hence, agonistic to Family, both his family at home and his fellow troops.

#### *Family-Quit & War-Quit*

"Quit" works in the film first agonistically to Family, and eventually in association with Family. Initially, the term works in two different versions of Family: Kyle's fellow Navy Seals; and Kyle's immediate family – Taya and his children. When Kyle first inquires about the Navy Seal program, a Navy recruiter tells him "that most men wash out, they quit" (Eastwood et al, 2014). Kyle responds: "I'm not most men, sir. I don't quit" (Eastwood et al, 2014). In his Navy Seal training, the boot camp trainers define the term as shameful, noting that not all people make it through Seal training and those who give up are quitters. We hear one trainer ask Kyle, "You a quitter, boy?" (Eastwood et al., 2014). The same trainer later shouts "We gonna weed through the quitters!" (Eastwood et al., 2014). When one trainee gives up and rings a certain bell signaling he is leaving, the same trainer points and shouts "There it is! That is a quitter! Say



goodbye, I say good riddance! He quits on you here, he's gonna quit on you in the field of battle!" (Eastwood et al, 2014). This trainer defines quitting as anathema to their family of Navy Seals. Family-Quit is, thus, first presented as an oppositional cluster.

Kyle uses "quit" as anathema to his family at home as well, defining his actions in Iraq as protecting the Nation (War-Protect), and treating Taya and his children as being encompassed in the nation. Quitting the war is quitting the Nation-as-Family, including his own family. However, Kyle's treatment of his family as simply being protected through war neglects his personal responsibility to them. His ignoring of this responsibility in exchange for participation in war contributes to destroying his family. Coming home and remaining silent, alienating himself from his family, is not protecting them, it is hurting them. Taya finally tells Kyle he must quit the war. His actions – protecting through the act of war – are destroying their family:

I'm here. Your family is here. Your children have no father [...] You don't know when to quit! You did your part, you sacrificed enough, you have somebody else go! [...] You find a way! You have to! Okay, I need you to be human again! I need you here! I need you here! If you leave again, I don't think we'll be here when you get back. (Eastwood et al., 2014)

For Taya, quitting is necessary to save their family. If Kyle does not quit the war, he will lose his family. Thus, "Quit" becomes associational to Family. Quitting is no longer oppositional, but necessary.

In Kyle's post-war experiences with Veterans Affairs, the Family-Quit associational cluster becomes even clearer. Kyle first tells his counselor that he wishes he could keep saving dying people in the war, but he cannot because he is not there: "I'm willing and able to be there, but I'm not. I quit" (Eastwood et al., 2014). Kyle feels guilty, showcasing how he still may feel

regret from quitting the war. His counselor presents him an opportunity to expand his notion of protecting to helping disabled veterans. In this scene, “Quit” constitutes moving on, taking the next step in dealing with the issues of war that are best for Family, both his private family and his new veteran family. Quitting means putting the war behind. Quit, thus, has shifted in meaning from agonistic to associational. Although its original understanding is agonistic to Family, once it clusters with War it becomes associational to Family because War is anathema to Family.

### *Misreading Clusters*

Overall, a cluster analysis of *Sniper* reveals that Family is the most frequent and resonant key term, or God term, in the film. This analysis also shows an agon between Family and War. The great internal battle Kyle experiences is revealed not to be a fight between good and evil, but a misplaced notion of protecting a family through war. Fighting war to protect family does not protect families, it destroys them. This is shown through the use of key terms that cluster around War, but shift in meaning for Kyle throughout the film. Terms like “Protect” shift in meaning, where Family-Protect is revealed not to be associational, but oppositional [i.e. Taya: “You’re not protecting us by not talking about it.”]. Family-Quit is a cluster that is revealed to be associational, not oppositional, where the meaning of “Quit” shifts from being anathema to family to being necessary. Quitting the war becomes not only necessary to save the family, but also to moving on, coping.

The cluster analysis of key terms makes the case that *Sniper* exhibits predominantly anti-war elements. The vast majority of scenes use language that cluster around the god term Family; the devil term that is destructive to Family is War. Key terms that cluster around War, such as “Protect” and “Plan,” reveal that when used by Kyle for creating Family, they instead help only

in destroying Family. However, partisan audiences have drawn a sharply different message. In what follows, I argue that they misread the film because of reliance on their terministic screens. In developing this position, I show how conservative terministic screens and liberal terministic screens cause audiences to misread the film.

#### Terministic Screening of *American Sniper*

Despite anti-war elements in the film, the character of Chris Kyle is a powerful symbol that partisans focus upon over these anti-war elements. For liberals, his character triggers key terms that run counter to liberal ideology. Conservatives identify with his ideology. Both sides deflect the film's anti-war elements. In the following section, I explore certain key terms in both conservative and liberal terministic screens and show how they can help explain partisan misreadings of the film.

#### *Scene: Taya Arguing with Kyle About Family-War*

Taya figures prominently as an anti-war voice in the film. In multiple examples of dialogue, Taya highlights how war destroys families: "You're not protecting me," "It's not about them [the enemy]. It's about us," "I'm making memories by myself. I have no one to share them with," "If you think this war isn't changing you, you're wrong," and "I need you to be human again" (Eastwood et al., 2014). In these examples, Taya articulates how Kyle's worldview is damaging their family, alienating Taya, and ultimately turning him into something inhuman. However, Kyle's language, not Taya's, is selected by conservatives and liberals. The reason for this can be explained through examining Kyle's use of key terms that resonate positively with conservatives and negatively with liberals. To demonstrate, I look at Kyle's different responses to Taya's anti-war statements.

*Key conservative terms: Sanctity/Degradation, Patriotism*

When Taya first argues against Kyle's refusal to discuss the war openly with her, he says "I don't want that getting into your head" (Eastwood et al., 2014). Later, when Taya brings up how she is making important family memories by herself, he tells her "[the Seal team] can't wait, and we can" (Eastwood et al., 2014). When Taya tells him that he does not know how to quit the war, he tells her "I have to serve my country" (Eastwood et al., 2014). Conservatives are able to deflect Taya's arguments because of Kyle's language. His refusal to discuss the war with Taya taps into important conservative terms like Sanctity and its inverse, Degradation. For conservatives, Family is sacred, and it must be shielded from the details of war. Kyle discussing the war with Taya would be degrading to Family, violating a core conservative belief. Further, using Lakoff's (1996) SFM, conservative families observe strict gender roles (p. 66). Per this model, Taya should not involve herself in the details of war because it is not her place. When she questions Kyle's silence, she taps into Degradation, where her actions are outside her prescribed family role as mother and subordinate to her husband and, hence, degrade Family. In short, conservatives value Kyle's responses and devalue Taya's.

When Kyle brings up "country," he taps into the conservative term Patriotism. Similarly, Kyle's comment that his family can wait but the war cannot links to a patriotic worldview. When Taya says she is making memories by herself, conservatives see her situation as a necessary price for Kyle's patriotism. Since Kyle sees the nation as Family, quitting the war would violate that family's sanctity. Hence, Kyle's defenses of his sheepdog worldview is accepted by conservatives, who deflect Taya's criticisms.

*Key liberal terms: Bigotry, Basic Human Dignity*

Like conservatives, liberals deflect the anti-war elements in these scenes. However, liberal terministic screens use a different vocabulary for this deflection. When Kyle tells Taya that the people he fought were “savages,” this taps into the liberal terms such as Bigotry and Basic Human Dignity. Liberals see Kyle’s use of the term “savages” not as a description of the barbarism of people like the Butcher, but instead as a racial slur against all Iraqis. For liberals, Taya’s argument about how the war was destroying their family is deflected due to Kyle’s use of the term “savages.” In short, liberals are distracted by Kyle’s use of anti-liberal terms.

*Scene: Marc Lee Questioning the War; Marc’s Poem*

In a scene with fellow Seal Marc Lee, Kyle defends the U.S. invasion of Iraq: “There’s evil here. We’ve seen it” (Eastwood et al., 2014). Marc responds: “There’s evil everywhere” (Eastwood et al., 2014) and “I just want to believe in what we’re doing here” (Eastwood et al., 2014). This is the first scene to show someone openly questioning the U.S. invasion, one that ends with Marc humoring Kyle by letting him have the last word. Marc, however, is not convinced by Kyle’s sheepdog view of the war. When Marc is later killed in battle, his mother reads his anti-war poem at his funeral (“wrongful crusade”), and Taya is moved to question Kyle about it. Kyle defends his position still, telling her that “that poem killed him” (Eastwood et al., 2014). Marc’s statements criticizing U.S. presence in Iraq are filtered out by conservatives and liberals. A look at Kyle’s dialogue can help explain partisan deflecting.

*Key conservative terms: Punishment, Intrusion*

Conservative deflection of Marc’s anti-war statements can be explained by looking at terms such as Punishment and Intrusion. Punishment is important because, in the sheepdog mindset, the Iraq War is a grand punishment of terrorists for their part in 9/11 – an operation to

purge wolves from the land. Kyle's Seal team even sports "Punisher" logos on their uniforms and vehicles, their official team symbol defining them for all who see their presence. Punishment is ultimately what kills Marc. When one of their own is shot, the team decides to seek vengeance: "An eye for an eye," says Marc (Eastwood et al., 2014). In their pursuit, they fail, and Marc is killed. Marc's death showcases the futility of not only war, but the ideal of punishment, or vengeance. Their worldview leads conservatives to deflect this point. Kyle offers an explanation of Marc's death that is more palatable to conservatives when he tells Taya "that poem killed him" (Eastwood et al., 2014). This flawed explanation, perhaps reflecting Kyle's desperation at defending the sheepdog worldview, taps into the important conservative term, Intrusion. When Kyle says this, he means that Marc was distracted from his punishing duties, that his poem was an intrusion. Kyle implies that Marc was killed because he was too focused on the problems with their presence in Iraq to do his job effectively.

*Key liberal terms: Oppression, Pragmatism*

Kyle's blaming of a poem for Marc's death sheds light on an important agon between liberal and conservative ideologies: Pragmatism-Principle. Using Tanenhaus' (2008) explanation, conservatives value principles, and liberals value pragmatism. Kyle's rigid adherence to his sheepdog principles reflects conservative ideals, including an unapologetic defense of those ideals. This adherence, even amid all the Family-War obstacles that Kyle has faced to this point, seems foolish to liberals. For liberals, Kyle blaming a poem for the death of his compatriot is not pragmatic; it is foolish. Since liberals view the Iraq War and the conservative politics that spurred it as wrongful, they see Kyle blaming Marc's poem as part of a foolhardy defense of a failed war.

*Scene: Both Kyle Brothers Drop the Sheepdog Approach to War*

Eastwood also takes to task Kyle's sheepdog upbringing and how it contributes to war. In the narrative, both Kyle and his younger brother ultimately shake off the sheepdog mentality that led them to view war as an acceptable action. For Kyle, this is shown after the final battle when he drops his rifle in the dirt, shaking off his father's teachings. For Jeff, this happens early in the film, when the brothers meet by chance on the Iraqi tarmac. Here, Jeff is shown as a changed man, no longer the little brother who Kyle knew. When Jeff speaks, he sounds as if he is at the point of breaking down, saying "fuck this place." In reaction, Kyle immediately goes from smiling with excitement to frowning with concern. Kyle is confounded at how Jeff, who was raised in the same household, under the same father, under the same sheepdog ethos, could criticize the war in such a way. When Kyle finally quits the war himself, throwing his sniper rifle away, this makes the point that war is not compatible with protecting Family. Despite this evidence, partisan audiences deflect it. An explanation for this is not so much in verbal key terms, but in the nonverbal depiction of the enemy in the battle.

*Key liberal terms: Basic Human Dignity, Equal Opportunity, Pragmatism*

At no moment in the final battle is there an Iraqi fighter's point of view. Because the point of view remains with Kyle and Americans, liberals tend to focus less on anti-war elements and more on the unequal treatment of Iraqis. In the final battle scene, Kyle and his compatriots are completely outnumbered, as droves of insurgents charge toward them on all sides. For liberals, this is a prejudiced depiction of Iraqis as faceless killers, despite the anti-war elements that have led up to this scene. Further, the depictions of the elusive enemy sniper Mustafa, whom Kyle contends with throughout all four tours of duty, triggers the liberal key term Pragmatism. This happens because Kyle treats the sniper as a villain, a single enemy who must be vanquished.

Liberals preoccupied with Kyle may easily view the film as endorsing the non-pragmatic view that this war is justified because evil must be destroyed. Eastwood, however, depicts Kyle's focus on Mustafa as an obsession in order to make an anti-war argument.

Eastwood strategically uses Kyle's treatment of Mustafa as a "bad guy" to show the danger in all consuming hatred. During the final battle, Kyle feels he finally has Mustafa in his line of sight, an opportunity to exact revenge on him and kill the "bad guy." Army soldiers in Kyle's squadron tell him to stand down or his shot will alert the surrounding insurgents. Kyle chooses to shoot, killing Mustafa. When this happens, Kyle does not celebrate. He is motionless, conflicted; he got nothing out of killing Mustafa. Further, the final shot alerts multiple insurgents who descend on their position. This sheepdog behavior almost gets Kyle and many other Americans killed. In short, Kyle does not win by killing Mustafa: he and other Americans lose.

*Key conservative terms: Evil, Mission Accomplished*

Conservatives truly believe in Evil, and consequently the good/bad framework is an important way of understanding their views. Rigidly adhering to sheepdog principles can lead conservatives to view insurgents as evil men deserving punishment by the heroic Chris Kyle and other Americans. Kyle's sniper shot that triggered the final battle is seen as justified in order to kill the evil villain. The way Mustafa is presented leads conservatives to see him as totally Evil. When Kyle's fellow Seal says "Mission accomplished" after Mustafa is killed, Eastwood's critique of President George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" gaffe, Kyle does not feel accomplished at all. However, conservatives focus on the act of killing terrorists, leading them to miss the anti-war critique.



*Scene: The Killing of Iraqi Civilians*

Another important scene in the film includes Kyle's first sniper kills: the woman and her child. Despite Kyle's clear agitation at killing the two, as well as his scolding of his compatriot for celebrating, the meaning of the incident is deflected by both conservative and liberal partisans.

*Key conservative term: Evil*

*Key liberal terms: Pragmatism, Social Forces, Human Rights, Basic Human Dignity*

Using a conservative terministic screen, Kyle's killing of a child is seen as defeating Evil. Indeed, Kyle describes the situation to his fellow Seal as "evil like I ain't ever seen before" (Eastwood et al., 2014). Using Lakoff's (1996) NPM terminology of nurturance, liberals view the killing of any child as evil (p. 113). In their view, children should be nurtured, protected, even if their parents have been radicalized. Kyle's endorsement of the idea that evil exists, justifying the killing of a child, runs anathema to liberal worldviews. The killing of a child resonates so strongly to liberals that any regret or hesitation on Kyle's part is deflected. Kyle's compatriot who celebrates the kills calls the mother an "evil bitch," laughing it off before patting Kyle on the back and earning Kyle's "Get the fuck off me!" (Eastwood et al., 2014). For liberals, both Kyle and his compatriot are equally guilty, regardless of one enjoying the killing and the other regretting it. For liberals, the idea of killing a child and his mother personifies immorality. In contrast, conservatives believe in Evil and therefore justify Kyle's shooting of a child and his mother.

Kyle's invasion of the Sheikh's home is another important scene. When Kyle yells at the Sheikh and his family for remaining in a war zone, he dismisses the possibility that Iraqis are just as entitled to their homes as Americans. This conflicts with liberal terms like Human Rights and

Basic Human Dignity. The idea that Iraqis must give up everything due to an American occupation is seen as wrong by liberals. Liberals also deflect the killings of the Sheikh and his boy by the Butcher. The depiction of the Butcher as a man dressed in black who tortures those who speak to Americans resonates negatively with liberals, who reject such a characterization as simplistic. Deflecting even the idea that there were men like the Butcher in the war, liberals instead prioritize a fair depiction of Iraqis. This means that not only the murders of the Sheikh and his son are deflected, but the notion of radicalized evil terrorists becomes problematic for liberals. This deflection leads liberals to ignore the anti-war elements within the narrative.

*Summary: Kyle's Character as a Trigger of Terministic Screens*

For both liberals and conservatives, the anti-war elements that permeate through *Sniper* are deflected due to reliance on terministic screens. The key terms that make up both these terministic screens are triggered by specific uses of language. Further, Kyle's character is viewed positively by conservatives and negatively by liberals. For conservatives, he is simply an American hero. For liberals, Kyle's action and words run counter to liberal ideology and draw their focus away from anti-war elements. Ultimately, both conservatives and liberals view *Sniper* as pro-war: an endorsement of U.S. actions, a message that is agreeable to conservatives who support the invasion, and abhorrent to liberals who object to the invasion.

### Conclusion

Overall, using key vocabularies in conservative and liberal terministic screens can help explain why partisan audiences misread *Sniper* so drastically. For conservatives, the character of Chris Kyle so closely reflected key conservative terms that the underlying anti-war message was deflected. For liberals, the sheepdog worldview that Kyle espouses triggers terms that run counter to liberal terministic screens, causing them to deflect anti-war elements in the film.

The cluster analysis of key terms in the film reveals the shifting message and also explains the partisan response. Examining specific terms in conservative and liberal terministic screens helps explain why conservatives and liberals view *Sniper* as an endorsement of the war.

#### Chapter Four: What *American Sniper* Says About Today

In this project, I have examined partisan misreadings of *American Sniper*, explored the material that gives rise to divergent readings, and argued that terministic screens can account for these misreadings. In order to develop this argument, I used a Burkean cluster analysis to analyze the text. A cluster analysis reveals how key terms in the film activate partisan terministic screens, leading to misreading of the film. Using Burke's explanation of god terms and devil terms in cluster analyses, I identified Family as the god term in *Sniper*. In the narrative, all of Chris Kyle's decisions are founded on the importance of protecting Family. His family extends beyond his biological and immediate family to include his military family, and the entire nation.

In addition, I argued that the devil term in the film is War. Several key terms that cluster with War, including "Protect" and "Plan," ultimately prove destructive to Family. Kyle's devotion to War almost destroys his family and himself. In short, any term used to justify War in the name of Family, such as "Protect" and "Plan," is agonistic to Family. Further, the term "Quit" is originally shown as anathema to family, but when clustered with War, it becomes associational to Family. Kyle must quit the war in order to save his family.

I used the findings from the cluster analysis to show that *Sniper* makes a predominantly anti-war statement. This is accomplished by exposing problems in Chris Kyle's sheepdog worldview and tracing the outcome of the collision between War and Family. Using conservative and liberal vocabularies, drawn from scholarship on political behavior, I then argued that the portrayal of Chris Kyle's worldview, values, and decisions is key to understanding why both conservative and liberal audiences misread *Sniper*. From the cluster analysis, I discovered key words and actions in the film that activate partisan audiences' terministic screens, effectively filtering out the film's anti-war message. These key words and actions encompass both spoken

dialogue as well as non-verbal elements, such as the dropping of a rifle, facial expressions of characters, or the depiction of stressed home lives.

There are four important implications to take away from this project. First, partisan audiences cannot interpret messages apart from their own terministic screens. All of us are limited by the vocabularies that we use to understand the world. As Burke noted, these vocabularies reflect, but also select and deflect the world. In this case, conservative and liberal terminologies deflected both audiences from the anti-war message in the film. Using key scenes in *Sniper* that used language resonant with both conservative and liberal vocabularies, I showed how these audiences can shift focus away from the primary message. Overall, partisan audiences only focus on the resonant ideological elements, resulting in a failed understanding of the film. Clearly, this point is generalizable. Studies on terministic screens are particularly useful today in learning how messaging is read or misread. Conservative researcher Frank Luntz has made a career of finding what words resonate with American voters, albeit for purposes of crafting effective conservative political rhetoric. However, his findings are important not for their political goals, but for what they say about audience response to choice words over others. In short, words matter, an area where terministic screens are highly relevant.

The second implication is that the reaction to the film is indicative of the state of partisan polarization in the nation today. Despite the predominant anti-war message in the film, the dominant conversation about it was made up of partisan-tinged rhetoric: conservatives praising the film for portraying Kyle as a hero, and liberals condemning it for endorsing the Iraq War. Of course, the viewers of the film are also citizens. Their inability to put aside their terministic worldviews about a film that functioned as a romance and action story, in addition to ideological commentary, is a sign of the level of polarization in the nation. War is itself a highly political

issue, from the decisions to go to war, the ideologies that celebrate or condemn war, and how to address veteran issues post-war. War films are challenging given this reality. Viewers of Vietnam War films understood that films like *The Green Berets* (1968) were pro-war, while *Coming Home* (1978) took the opposite view. With today's polarized society, audience reception of war films has shifted. As this study has shown, political aspects of war like Chris Kyle's ideology may be their only focus in a war film, begging further attention in both cultural studies, as well as film studies. Further, the immense box office success of *Sniper* speaks to how the audience response to the film was particularly due to the conservative reading of the film as a celebration of pro-war heroism. In short, our society is so polarized today that liberals and conservatives who saw *Sniper* essentially saw different films. This is telling about today's audiences and begs continual study for not only rhetorical research, but related fields such as political communication, film, and cultural studies.

Moreover, the polarization about *Sniper* is clearly present on a host of other topics. In today's political climate, liberals and conservatives often do more than value different arguments and values; they exist in different political realities. The consistent description of the Affordable Care Act as a disaster in the 2016 Republican primaries is merely one example of how terministic screens reflect extreme polarization. For Republican primary voters, the health care program was a disaster and no facts about the 20 million people covered or lower than expected health care costs could shift their views.

The third implication concerns the film's director, Clint Eastwood, and how this analysis shifts the understanding of him as a conservative ideologue. Eastwood has been defined as a right-wing persona, in part due to his speech at the 2012 Republican National Convention (RNC) criticizing President Barack Obama. However, a detailed analysis of *Sniper* suggests that

Eastwood is more than a knee-jerk neo-conservative. While as a citizen Eastwood may espouse such views, as a director he presented a nuanced story of how a terrible war damaged the heroes fighting it and sometimes destroyed their families. Surprisingly, there is more evidence against the notion of Eastwood as a neo-conservative, seen in his wide body of films that tackle progressive social issues. In *Unforgiven* (1992), Eastwood deglamorizes the gratuitous killing in Western films; in *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), he addresses gender and class issues for women in sports; in *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), he humanizes the Japanese soldiers during World War II; in *Changeling* (2008), he tackles the corrupt criminal justice system of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century; and he was even criticized by conservatives for dramatizing the homosexual private life of J. Edgar Hoover in *J. Edgar* (2011). Despite Eastwood's personal ideology, his film oeuvre contains highly progressively-minded issue films. From my analysis, I have shown how *American Sniper* is a predominantly anti-Iraq War film that stands as another example of his progressive social commentary.

A final implication from this project relates to the importance of films as texts for rhetorical criticism. Of course, films are often the subject matter for analysis by cultural critics. The renaissance in cultural criticism has done a great deal to show how cinema and other cultural products both reflect and shape our symbolic universe. There is no question about the value of such criticism. And yet my analysis of how partisan audiences can misread a film suggests that traditional audience-centered rhetorical criticism remains valuable and that it should not be limited to speeches or the texts common in public address. Criticism of film need not be the province of only cultural critics. Through close analysis of *American Sniper*, I have made the case that a film reveals a great deal about how audiences can read and misread messages.

Focusing on both textual elements and how audiences understand them may still produce useful insights.

My audience-centered analysis does not exhaust study of this text, nor exclude cultural criticism from finding other important information relevant to our discipline. Additionally, related texts such as Chris Kyle's autobiography, as well as his various television appearances, may also shed light on the *American Sniper* subject matter that this present study has not explored. I focused only on narrative elements, and have excluded the autobiography and other related texts. I focused only on the film because too many details from the autobiography are not seen in the film and, thus, not part of this study's text. Considering how popular the real Chris Kyle was in conservative circles, this may explain why so many conservative audiences turned out in movie theaters, helping propel the film into box office history. Their reliance on their terministic screens is reflected by this, where entering theaters already expecting a preferred version of Kyle deflects any differences presented by Eastwood. Further, a comparison of Eastwood's film and the real Kyle's autobiography shows that there is a significant difference between the two Chris Kyles, which would have significantly altered the focus of my study. However, the autobiography can provide additional findings for the subject of Chris Kyle, as well as Eastwood, for other research endeavors.

In conclusion, Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* is a film that criticizes war, what it does to those who participate in it, and the conservative ideology that justifies resorting to war in cases where national security is not directly threatened. The film primarily does this by showing that war is destructive to families. The film also refrains from presenting Kyle as a monster, but instead as a mistaken American still worthy of respect. Eastwood does not mean to take the actual Chris Kyle to task, but to use his story as an opportunity to make an argument about our



veterans and what they experience. In short, Eastwood's depiction condemns the war, not the warrior. Despite this ideological critique, conservative and liberal partisans deflected the film's message. Kenneth Burke's theory of terministic screens and contemporary research on the nature of conservative and liberal screens helps explain this result.

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