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The Immediacy of Narrated Combat: Operation Iraqi Freedom as Public Spectacle

Jason T. McEntee

Abstract:

From the Vietnam War to Operation Desert Storm to Operation Iraqi Freedom, Americans have seen a dramatic shift in the ways they *see* combat - countless, and often dubious, images certainly impact how they interpret their warriors' actions. Iraqi Freedom presents an interesting shift in the immediate availability of numerous fiction and non-fiction narratives often stemming from the accounts of the soldiers themselves. I refer to this shift as the *immediacy of narrated combat*. Iraqi Freedom, unlike Vietnam and Desert Storm, has seen an almost immediate response in terms of the narratives we see and read, including movies, television programs, CD-ROM compilations, video games, numerous videos brought back with, and blogs posted by, our men and women serving in, and subsequently returning from, Iraq, and literary non-fiction accounts of combat. Much as the Bush I Administration used a mass-mediated, pro-war narrative to spin a decisive Gulf War victory into a restoration of national zest for armed combat, the Bush II Administration, despite its efforts to create, deliver, and maintain a mass-mediated, pro-war narrative, has seen this narrative beset by counter-narratives that have eroded its credibility and ultimately revealed more rational and sober accounts of Iraqi Freedom.

Key Words: Narrated combat, Operation Iraqi Freedom, war/combat media representation.

I. Introduction

On the Kuma\War web-site, one sees the tagline 'Kuma Reality Games - TV for a Generation Raised on Games'; however, a somewhat contradictory, though nonetheless ironic, rebuffing of 'reality' appears on its 'Legal' information page: 'Kuma games are works of fiction. Any Kuma game that is based on real-world events is only representational and not an accurate depiction of real-world events.'¹ Despite this discrepancy in the use of the term - or, rather, the idea of - realism, Kuma\War maintains its painstaking recreation of actual Operation Iraqi Freedom missions, which one can 'join' and play in chronological order. The action can begin with the raid on Baghdad, continue with the capture of Saddam Hussein, move to such cities as Sadr, and, more recently, can include such scenarios as the 'Abu Ghraib Mission'.²

Some four years after the onset of the war in Iraq, the April 2, 2007, *Newsweek* 'Voices of the Fallen' issue features letters home from now-deceased American soldiers in Iraq. Several actual 'death' letters appear in the magazine, capturing the last thoughts of warriors who sense that death is near.³ What does one do if after undertaking a mission on Kuma\War, she or he should read the *Newsweek* article? Would one feel guilty taking pleasure in 'reliving' an event that cost soldiers' lives? Or does one feel as though she or he can honour the dead by learning more about the combat experience? Conversely, would soldiers of this and other American wars use the game as a form of therapy or release?

The Kuma\War game's ability to keep players in close temporal and mock spatial proximity to the war and its warriors, some of whom will return home and wish to erase these memories, serves as a fascinating bookend to the *Newsweek* issue. A citizen/warrior binary emerges: American citizens (some of whom undoubtedly are veterans of this and/or other wars) plunge themselves into 'reality-based' combat while American warriors fight in Iraq. Ironically, American scientists recently discovered drugs that can effectively 'erase' traumatic memories, and how they - along with therapy - would be useful for PTSD-suffering soldiers who have returned from Iraq.⁴ A tension between remembering/learning and dis-remembering/unlearning underpins the ways Americans receive and assess war/combat narratives and information. That is, why would the warrior wish to forget that which the nation's citizenry is told to accept as noble and true in the defense of all things 'democratic' and 'free'?

2. Tracing the Immediacy of Narrated Combat

The questions raised in the 'Introduction' are troubling because technological advances in information dissemination have redefined the ways Americans receive information about war. Mainstream media sources such as *Newsweek* are subservient to the bottom line of producing revenue, and they often rely on sensationalized stories of death - regardless of the means - to be 'cash cows', even if the story comes across as a thoughtful homage to the deceased's legacy. War/combat narratives ranging from *The Iliad* to the photographic essays of the American Civil War to the 20th century's sad legacy of world wars privilege death more so than heroism, rendering death, as a public experience, one of the - if not *the* - dominant themes in war/combat narratives.

The loss of lives, not coincidentally, has driven the collective American attitude toward Iraqi Freedom, ranging from widespread support for war in the wake of 9/11 to waning support as the war pushes into its fourth year and nears its four thousandth American warrior casualty. Surprisingly, the *Newsweek* issue signals a clear shift in mainstream American attitudes toward the war - a shift from accepting as the dominant

war narrative the jingoistic 'us or them' rhetoric of the Bush Administration to allowing other, more critical and Bush-contradicting narratives to share the stage. The Bush Administration, following Bush, Sr.'s, lead and in conjunction with the Pentagon, has worked hard to suppress, or at the very least to sanitize, personalized discussions and images of warrior deaths that would emerge from mainstream American media outlets. Many critics point to the 'uncensored' nature of Vietnam War reportage as the catalyst for the government to suppress and control American war information, as Mitchel Roth observes: 'Unlike World War II there was no formal censorship. Compared to subsequent wars accreditation was relatively easy to secure in Vietnam, but correspondents were required to accept certain limitations'; these limitations, however, were easily overcome, as they involved verification procedures such as, among other things, possessing an up-to-date passport as well as a 'letter from an employer in the realm of news reporting stating that the employer took full responsibility for the actions of the press representative'.⁵

To gauge how Americans have received information about Iraqi Freedom, one might recall the suppressed images of American flag-draped coffins containing fallen warriors returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan. This policy of suppressing images of American warrior coffins has since been changed.⁶ Yet, for instance, when the media circus surrounding the vacuous 'actress' Anna Nicole Smith's death in February, 2007, reminds one of the frustrating reality of death-as-public-spectacle, how does one contextualise a news story about soldiers' deaths that receives a fraction of the time and attention of a celebrity's demise? How can one assess this media dichotomy when the Pentagon stifles the ways Americans see and learn about the horror of combat?

In this essay, I argue that much as the Bush I Administration used a mass-mediated, pro-war narrative to spin a decisive Gulf War victory into a restoration of national zest for armed combat, the Bush II Administration, despite its efforts to create, deliver, and maintain a mass-mediated, pro-war narrative, has seen this narrative beset by counter-narratives that have eroded its credibility and ultimately revealed more rational and sober accounts of Iraqi Freedom. This loss of control over a dominant war narrative has occurred in large part due to the technological advances (the Internet, for example) redefining information dissemination. Despite the limitations placed on the American media, Operation Iraqi Freedom, not unlike the United States' wars before 9/11, has slowly begun to yield a massive amount of well-rounded and readily-available war news and general information; however, what distinguishes this war from its predecessors is that a massive amount of published narratives emanating from such sources as soldier accounts as well as mass-media driven products such as movies, CD-ROMS, and video games are appearing while the war takes place.

Thus, in building upon Stuart Allan's insightful work on Iraqi Freedom news reportage, I refer to this change as the *immediacy of narrated combat*. The parameters of this change become evident when one considers that although riveting Vietnam War footage broadcast into American living rooms, newspaper, and magazine reports, and word-of-mouth warrior testimonies shaped American attitudes about the war, an immediate abundance of soldier accounts, fiction and non-fiction narratives, or other products such as movies, did not appear *en masse* until after the war's conclusion.⁷ For example, aside from Bernard Fall's *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (1969) and Don Oberdorfer's *Tet* (1971), several years passed before serious-minded non-fiction literary texts, such as Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (both 1977), would address the war and capture the public's attention. Not surprisingly, Robin Moore's *The Green Berets* (1965) and the John Wayne movie version (1968), which were passed off as non-fiction at the time, were successful in terms of reaching audiences. Now challenged as shaky non-fiction at best, Moore's and Wayne's accounts serve as reminders of the United States' early optimism about the war, while documentaries such as *The Anderson Platoon* (1966), *Vietnam: In the Year of the Pig* (1969), and *Hearts and Minds* (1974) serve as stark counterpoints to this optimism. A few history texts would emerge while the war still raged, including Felix Green's *Vietnam! Vietnam! In Photographs and Text* (1966), David Halberstam's *The Best and Brightest* (1969), and Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam* (1972). Fiction narratives in print form (Daniel Ford's *Incident at Muc Wa* [1967]) appeared, but fictional movies did not. For example, Ford's book was made into the movie *Go Tell the Spartans*, but not until 1978.

In contrast, Desert Storm, seen in millions of living rooms in what became known as the 'CNN Effect', ended almost as abruptly as it started, providing little time for narratives to emerge during combat.⁸ Those who chose to *watch* the war likely have formed their mostly positive opinions of it from CNN and other network coverage that showed images of American dominance and victory instead of carnage and destruction – a point that the movie *Three Kings* examines in trenchant detail in 1998, some seven years after the war's conclusion. The war itself, defined by the Bush Administration's carefully mass-mediated terms, ultimately served as a means for the administration to revitalize the American public's zest for war – to portray the American warrior as heroic and to put to rest the demons of that 'other' war, Vietnam. It would in fact end the Vietnam Syndrome, as Bush, Sr., infamously proclaimed.⁹ Viewers of mainstream Desert Storm news not only have missed incredible amounts of information, including American and Iraqi casualty statistics, Gulf War Syndrome cases, and media manipulation stunts pushed by the Bush Administration but also they have in

essence failed in their roles as discerning citizens. Allan connects the 'immediacy' of Operation Iraqi Freedom news reportage to the stifled and often manipulated news reportage of Operation Desert Storm thus: '[due to] improvements in news . . . as well as the use of reports from 'embedded' correspondents, [reporters] insisted that many of the criticisms first levelled at 24-hr news in the 1991 Gulf War had been laid to rest'.¹⁰

Several eye-opening reports about Desert Storm, including full-fledged book-length academic and non-academic studies as well as myriad fiction and non-fiction literary and filmic narratives, appeared after the war's conclusion.¹¹ Pilot Rhonda Cornum's story, *She Went to War*, appeared in 1993 and was highly fictionalised in the movie *Courage Under Fire* (1996). Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead*, released in 2003, was made into a movie in 2005. David O. Russell's *Three Kings* provided audiences with a fictional, highly cynical account of the war. Similarly, Larry Beinhart's fictional novel *American Hero* (1993) criticizes the mass-media-manipulation that has become emblematic of the war, and this novel later appeared as the movie *Wag the Dog* (1997). Not surprisingly, the majority of these narratives provide alternative perspectives to the 'overwhelming', Vietnam Syndrome-ending victory in Desert Storm.

Unlike the two wars that preceded it, Operation Iraqi Freedom has seen an immediate response in terms of fiction and non-fiction narratives we can see and read. Movies such as *American Soldiers* (2005) assess the war while it continues. Purportedly, it is based on real events occurring throughout one day in Iraq and includes typical lines of combat dialogue such as 'I thought this war was over.'¹² Documentary movies such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and *Gunner Palace* (2005) examine the war and combat soldiers' actions in various ways. The FX Network's television drama series *Over There* (2005), while not an especially compelling narrative, becomes noteworthy for its attempt to narrate the war for mass audiences. The Progressive Management's massive CD-ROM compilation the *21st Century Guide to Operation Iraqi Freedom* (2006) contains thousands of pages of public documents, news articles, and images from Iraqi Freedom, 2003 to 2006 – a wealth of information that previously, in the absence of digital media, would have taken years to amass. Video games such as *Kuma!War* allow people to experience the war from the comfort of their own homes. One has access to numerous graphic novels such as *Combat Zone: True Tales of GIs in Iraq* (2005) and *War-Fix* (2006), and literary non-fiction accounts of combat such as Kayla Williams' *Love My Rifle More than You* (2005) Jessica Lynch's propagandistic, *I am a Soldier, Too* (2003). Lynch's narrative aired as a television movie, *Saving Jessica Lynch*, mere days before the book's release. All of these allow Americans to immerse themselves in the same war taking place halfway across the world.

Numerous television and print advertisements as well as recruitment DVDs for the branches of the military, many of which employ a video-game visual style, entice potential warriors with narratives of success and heroism. To this end, the late Pat Tillman, who left the National Football League's Arizona Cardinals to fight in Iraq, possesses a personal narrative of heroic-death-proved-death-by-friendly-fire. His narrative, promoted non-stop by mainstream American media, has played out as a sad reminder of how manufacturing heroes comes at the expense of honour amongst comrades and privacy for family. Tillman, much as Lynch before him, served an *immediate* purpose in generating support for the war - as American heroes consumed in a visual manner (photographs and news footage), their narratives helped drum up war support that swelled early in the campaign but has waned in its later stages.

More specifically, in order to gauge the difference between Iraqi Freedom and its two predecessors, one can look at the sheer numbers of fiction movie narratives that have appeared or will be released soon and how these movies criticize the Iraq war. In August, 2007, at the Venice Film Festival, director Brian DePalma's new movie *Redacted* 'stunned' audiences with its stark account of American soldiers who raped a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl and then killed her and her family. According to reports, DePalma came across this narrative on the Internet, prompting him to state to reporters: 'The pictures are what will stop the war. One only hopes these images will get the public incensed enough to motivate their Congressmen to vote against this war.'¹³

Currently, one has access to several movies about the war: *The Marine* (2006; Iraqi Freedom stateside fantasy) and *Home of the Brave* (2006; coming-home melodrama), along with the documentaries *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* and *No End in Sight* (both 2007), *Why We Fight* (2005); *Big Storm: The Lyndie England Story* (2006), *Gunner Palace*, and *Control Room* (2004). Several more movies about Iraqi Freedom are in production. These include: *Stop Loss* (soldier refuses to return to combat), *Grace is Gone* (man's wife dies in combat), *The Return* (a veteran's story), *Absent Hearts* (students with parents in the war), and *The Hurt Locker* (story about a bomb-disposal unit in Iraq).¹⁴ To put this in perspective, as of 2007, the amount of released and soon-to-be-released movies about the war by far exceeds the amount of Vietnam War movies, fictional or otherwise, released during the entire ten-year duration of that war.

3. Competing Narratives: The Alternatives to Mainstream Media

Unlike they were in Vietnam and especially Desert Storm, mainstream news media resources, which served the dual roles of watchdogs for scandals and chroniclers of combat, are no longer the dominant means of generating war information even though they are 'immediate' in their

delivery. They often rely on the military's official news releases for and responses to combat due to the overtly-patriotic cultural climate in the wake of 9/11 – a climate that the Bush Administration capitalized on in full, using its power to discredit reporters who did not tow the party line.¹⁵ For instance, embedded reporters, who are often entrusted with telling the real stories emanating from war, have seen a compromised collective ethos in large part due to the military's control of their training; Stephen Reese discusses 'controlled' embedding in Desert Storm thus: 'embedding was a form of control that created a strong dependency relationship between journalists and their units (not only for getting the story but for protection in a dangerous place)'.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, for Iraqi Freedom, the Pentagon funded and controlled some 662 reporters who, at the war's start, were embedded with military units only. They were given several amenities, including food and communications help, while they also obeyed the Pentagon's fifty rules, 'including a long list of things on which they could not report, such as dead bodies'.¹⁷ American actor/director/activist Tim Robbins critiques this instance of government-regulated media manipulation in his recent play, *Embedded*, which was met with mixed reviews but did manage to address the darker side of embedded war reporting.¹⁸

Similarly, American coverage of the Vietnam War started off as overtly patriotic until 1968 (Tet), when public opinion became deeply divided about the war, and its presentation on television changed to reflect that attitude. Desert Storm reporters were given access to official military briefings as well as expert analysis of these briefings, but their access to soldiers was limited so as to prevent another Vietnam-type shift in public opinion. Many intellectuals accurately argued that the images emerging from Desert Storm were carefully chosen by the military and the Bush Administration – much as the 'press pools' were carefully assembled, monitored, and ultimately controlled – so as to keep public support for the war from wavering.¹⁹

Without a doubt, Americans see Iraqi Freedom through countless, and often alarming and somewhat dubious, journalistic images such as those from Abu Ghraib as well as the felling of Saddam's statue (itself staged, incidentally or not, as a public 'lynching'), which is examined as yet another American publicity stunt in the Al-Jazeera-exploring documentary *Control Room*. The victory rhetoric of Bush's infamous, rather ridiculous landing upon and 'Mission Accomplished' speech aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln* aircraft carrier on May 1st, 2003, has been chronicled as staged and in retrospect, inappropriate and irresponsible on several levels, including Bush's suspect National Guard flying record and the fact that the war is not over.²⁰

Despite the audacity of this publicity stunt coupled with the propensity of the Bush Administration to promote fabricated information with its warped and misguided optimistic appraisal (and re-appraisals) of the

war, *Time* magazine released a special 'War Commemorative Edition' entitled *21 Days to Baghdad: The Inside Story of How America Won the War Against Iraq*. The issue was to be displayed until September 15th, 2003, giving audiences a chance to grab a copy on the anniversary of the World Trade Centre attacks. Now, some four years into the war, the Bush Administration continues to profess, in rather troubling fashion, that we are winning in Iraq - or that we must not fail in Iraq - while the majority of mainstream news entities (the *Newsweek* article notwithstanding) choose not to run with stories that chronicle warrior deaths or defy the administration's belief that the United States is winning the war.²¹

Immediate access to myriad forms of war narratives and information, through traditional embedded reporting, alternative news sources, and especially through blogs, allows Americans to challenge the administration's positive/winning proclamation by affording Americans numerous and often contradictory ways to form attitudes about Iraqi Freedom. Serving as foils to the 'controlled' embedded reporters I mentioned earlier, embedded reporters such as Evan Wright of *Rolling Stone* and Katherine Skiba of *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, still provide excellent, detailed accounts of combat action, as their published accounts indicate.²² In addition, these reporters, much as many others do, endured various degrees of harsh conditions, including being near to or immersed in combat and battling the insufferable conditions of the desert. Non-embedded reporters and correspondents, such as Martha Raddatz of ABC News, also offer narratives that are equally as compelling. Raddatz, in *The Long Road Home: A Story of War and Family*, interviews warriors, commanding officers, and both stateside warriors and their family members to provide a detailed account of the harrowing battle of Sadr City in 2004. Many alternative news sources, such as *tomdispatch.com*, can be found on-line, and they regularly provide carefully researched and written counter-arguments to mainstream news coverage - a full list of alternative news sources can be found at www.alternativenews.net or www.vcn.bc.ca/bcla-ip/conf2002/koep.htm. These publications are prevalent, and they often appear in close temporal proximity to major Iraqi Freedom combat events, thus creating a trend that distinguishes this current war from its predecessors, especially Desert Storm.

Along these lines, warrior blogs have challenged not only the Bush Administration's portrayal of Iraqi Freedom but also the post-9/11 media's role in war correspondence. Warrior blogs are not unlike 'underground' publications such as *Vietnam GI*. This newspaper stemmed from the communication between and organization of Vietnam soldiers, many of whom wanted to express their disdain for the war and the way it was reported as well as their disdain for their commanders and the American government.²³ Similarly, Aaron Barlow, in *The Rise of the Blogosphere*, examines how blogs can challenge and subvert the problematic mainstream

media that in its inefficacy to accurately report war has: 'reached a new low, unable to question the [Bush] administration . . . suddenly unwilling to be anything more than a means of transmittal of government-produced statements'.²⁴ Warrior blogs are mostly public (some require passwords), and they can accomplish the same duplicitous watchdog/purveyor tasks once held by the media. Those who publish blogs *want* to be read, and they often refrain from any type of censorship in taking on an 'adversarial' role.²⁵ They can uphold or expose both the military's and the mainstream media's truths and fabrications while they also, at times simultaneously, promote the positive ethos of the American warrior as, for example, patriot or rebel; protector of freedom or enslaver; as liberator or incarcerator. And, of course, they can be completely fictitious – manufactured stories to enrapture an audience.

At this time, when they are not being shut down or closely monitored by the Department of Defense, existing warrior blogs fall into three distinct categories.²⁶ First, one can access the *Rebel Warrior Blog*. Army warrior Colby Buzzell, an Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, was among the first to begin posting blogs while 'in country'. His award-winning book, *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005), a collection of his blog (<http://cbftw.blogspot.com/>) posts from 2003 (with additional text to serve as background to the posts), 'may be the last frank and open military blog book', according to Paul Jones, the chair of the judges for the Lulu Blooker Blog Prize.²⁷ In short, as an anonymous soldier going by 'cbftw' ('Colby Buzzell Fuck the War'), he becomes, as the book jacket boasts, the 'embedded reporter the Army couldn't control, despite its best, and often hilarious, efforts to do so'. After he gains a great deal of attention stateside, Buzzell comes under 'house arrest' while his superiors try to determine if he has compromised the military's operations. However, once the press starts asking questions about Buzzell, Buzzell is immediately released and begins his 'First Amendment' campaign by conducting an interview with National Public Radio. Though it is difficult to say that his is the 'first' warrior blog coming from Iraq, Buzzell's serves as a model for other warriors who also began posting blogs.

Second, *Dutiful Warrior Blogs* come from soldiers who do not compromise the military's operations or go too far in their criticism of the warriors' plights. Matthew 'Blackfive' Burden's book, *The Blog of War: Front-line Dispatches from Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan* (2006), contains numerous excerpts from blogs that fit this description. Burden began his 'milblog' *Blackfive* on June 18th, 2003, and his book is a collection of posts not only to that site but also from various other warrior blogs that he has chosen. The collection's mostly-'patriotic' tone serves as a differing perspective and fascinating companion to Buzzell's work and its 'fuck it' tone.²⁸

Third is the *Pornographic Warrior Blog*, a warrior's account of combat that often takes the form of 'war porn'. In his recent essay 'Accustomed to Their Own Atrocities in Iraq, U.S. Soldiers Have Become Murderers', Chris Hedges – a former war correspondent – assesses war as 'a pornography of violence' in that: 'War allows us to engage in lusts and passions we keep hidden in the deepest, most private interiors of our fantasy life. It allows us to destroy not only things but human beings.'²⁹ Hedges' use of the term 'pornography' dovetails with the phenomenon known as 'war porn': On-line materials from warriors who post graphic or, although the terms are subject to much debate (much as the definition of pornography is), *inappropriate* or *explicit* images and/or footage of carnage and destruction, of torture and misery, of combat and warrior celebration/ glorification, and, although less frequent, of explicit or implied sexual acts (as in the Abu Ghraib case of warriors subjecting detainees to simulated rape). The sexual connotation of pornography is appropriate in defining 'war porn', for traditional psychological analyses of combat tend to assess it, much as Hedges does, as a form of physical and psychological release not unlike the physical and psychological 'releases' driven by libido and played out through sexual acts.

Hence, in the 'release' of both gruesome and/or celebratory images and footage of soldiers and combat, warriors satisfy a need to share and in fact replay the events associated with war. A *Pornographic Warrior Blog* initially can appear as either of its *Rebel/Dutiful* counterparts, but what distinguishes it from them is its inclusion of the aforementioned types of images and footage. That is to say, in his or her blog, a warrior can write about and describe in detail the horrors of combat, but only when these written descriptions are accompanied by graphic images and/or footage do they become classified as 'war porn'. One can access numerous 'war porn' sites, articles, blogs, and other similar posts by simply accessing a search engine and entering such terms as 'war porn', 'Iraq war', 'war images', and any combination of these and other related terms.

4. Conclusion

The immediacy of narrated combat as I have attempted to define and use it here allows one to gauge how, in addition to news about the war, alternative war narratives in various formats and genres reveal wide-ranging attitudes about the war in Iraq, and ultimately challenge the Bush Administration's and the mainstream media's oft-positive assessment of Iraqi Freedom. On the one hand, the immediacy of narrated combat suggests that the United States can be seen as a nation of voyeurs privy to representations of combat that, in a historical sense starting with WWII and, excluding the second half of the Vietnam War, were known only to the warrior and then carefully sanitized and revealed to the population at large after elongated

periods of time. Little doubt remains that what people see, read, and hear on a daily basis influences their behaviours and attitudes, for better or worse, depending on their individual literacy skills. This becomes especially true when narrativised information is shocking or repeated *ad nauseam*, much as Bush's pro-war rhetoric is. On the other hand, analysing alternatives to mainstream methods of conveying information about the war (blogs, in particular) allow one to gauge how freedom of speech – the cornerstone of the free nation – can survive, and in many ways thrive, during wartime.

From the Vietnam War to Operation Desert Storm to Operation Iraqi Freedom, Americans have seen a dramatic shift in viewing combat. Diverse narratives and images have impacted how Americans interpret both their warriors' actions and the war itself. Indeed, the 'triumphant' journalistic images of Desert Storm served as a means for George Bush, Sr., to proclaim that the United States had finally overcome the Vietnam Syndrome. But viewers of Desert Storm combat footage and news stories did not see, as they did with stage two, post-1968 Vietnam War combat footage and news stories, horrific images of combat carnage involving American soldiers in a lost war. Of course, American casualties were low in Desert Storm, but they did exist, just not for consumption by the general American viewing population. By the time the expedient war was over, casualty rates on all sides would become afterthoughts for the masses.

Now, in the fourth full year of Iraqi Freedom, Americans are witnessing and sharing in a collective Vietnam-like shift in attitudes about the war. Public opinion has begun to turn against the war as seen in the 2006 November elections and opinion polls as well as in reactions to soldier casualties and scandals involving US soldiers (Abu Ghraib, for example). The 'immediate', Desert Storm-like positives that Americans received – and continue to receive from the Bush Administration – actually have begun to work against those in power that promoted them. At least in part, Americans can attribute this shift to the wealth of alternative narratives about the war, though the shift has yet to yield the sustained, stateside anti-war movement that came to define the Vietnam era or an agreed-upon withdrawal from Iraq. However, the more Bush beats his war drums, speaks positively of the efforts in Iraq, and looks vaingloriously toward the future, he cannot erase one thing Americans learned from Vietnam: That soldiers are dying for reasons unclear both to the soldiers who carry on in their absence and the nation's citizens who observe from a distance. Much as Americans saw a 'near-immediate' victory in Desert Storm, now they see the once-positive, 'victorious' Bush Administration/mainstream media-driven narratives giving way to more realistic, and often tragic, accounts of the American war efforts.

Notes

¹ Kuma\Reality Games, Kuma LLC, 2007, accessed 4 April, 2007, <www.kumawar.com>.

² *ibid.* One also can 'fight' in Afghanistan as well as Korea and Vietnam.

³ A publication of this nature is not necessarily new, narrative-wise. American warrior narratives have been published both by the 'popular' presses, such as F Schaeffer's collection of letters from warriors in Iraq and Afghanistan, *Letters from the Front: Letters Home from America's Military Family*, Carroll & Graf, New York, 2004, and by the 'serious' presses, such as T Wiener's *Voices of War: Stories of Service from the Home Front and the Front Lines*, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 2004.

⁴ R Goldman, 'Erasing the pain of the past'. *ABC News*, 20 March 2007, accessed 2 April 2007, <<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/story?id=2964509&page=1>>.

⁵ See M P Roth, *Historical Dictionary of War Journalism*, Greenwood Press, Westport (CT), 1997, p. 326. For a counter-argument to the 'uncensored war' theory, see P Robinson, 'Researching US media-state relations and twenty-first century wars', in *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*, S Allan and B Zeliger (eds), Routledge, London, 2004.

⁶ See J Garofoli and M B Stannard, 'Flag-draped Coffin photos released'. *SFGate.com*, 29 April 2005, accessed 22 July 2007, <<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/04/29/MNGT1CHIT11.DTL>>. Also see G Zoroya, 'Return of U.S. war dead kept solemn, secret'. *USA Today*, 30 December 2003, accessed 22 July 2007, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2003-12-31-casket-usat_x.htm>.

⁷ S Allan, 'The culture of distance: online reporting of the Iraq war', in Allan and Zeliger (eds), p. 349. Allan refers to television coverage of Iraqi Freedom as having 'effectively demonstrated the immediacy of real-time reporting'.

⁸ L S Eagleburger, C Kleber, S Livingston, & J Woodruff, 'The CNN effect'. in *The media and the War on Terrorism*, S Hess and M Kalb (eds), Brookings Institution P, Washington, D.C., 2003.

⁹ See P Mellencamp, 'Fearful thoughts: U.S. television since 9/11 and the wars in Iraq', in *Rethinking Global Security: Media, Popular Culture, and the 'War on Terror'*, A Martin and P Petro (eds), Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick (NJ), 2006. Also see J Neuman, *Lights, Camera, War: Is Media Technology Driving International Politics?*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1996.

¹⁰ See Allan, *op. cit.*

¹¹ See D Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1992, and P Taylor, *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992.

¹² Sidney J. Furie has directed many action movies with war/combat themes, including the Vietnam War classic, *The Boys in Company C* (1978).

¹³ See S Aloisi, 'Redacted' stuns Venice'. *Reuters.com*, 31 August 2007, accessed 31 August 2007, <http://today.reuters.com/news/articlenews.aspx?type=entertainmentNews&storyid=2007-0831T150344Z_01_L31903844_RTRUKOC_0_US_VENICE-IRAQ.xml&src=rss&rpc=22&sp=true>.

¹⁴ See M Cieply, 'When real bullets fly, movies bring war home'. *NYTimes.com*, 26 July 2007, accessed 27 July 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/26/movies/26movi.html?_r=2&hp=&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print&oref=slogin>; and C Collis, 'Reporting for duty'. *Entertainment Weekly*, 30 March 2007, pp. 7-8.

¹⁵ See D Dudge, *The War in Iraq and Why the Media Failed Us*, Praeger Publishers, Westport (CT), 2006.

¹⁶ S D Reese, 'Militarized journalism: framing dissent in the Persian Gulf wars', in Allan and Zeliger (eds), p. 261.

¹⁷ See O Boyd-Barrett, 'Understanding: the second casualty', in Allan and Zeliger (eds), p. 31.

¹⁸ *Embedded Live*, Cinema Libre, 2005, T Robbins (dir.).

¹⁹ See H B Franklin, 'From realism to virtual reality' and D C Hallin, 'Images of Vietnam and the Persian Gulf', in *Seeing Through the Media: the Persian Gulf War*, S Jeffords and L Rabinovitz (eds), Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick (NJ), 1994. Also see Boyd-Barrett.

²⁰ See J A Kuypers, *Bush's War: Media Bias and Justifications for War in a Terrorist Age*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham (MD), 2006.

²¹ See F Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold*, Penguin, New York, 2006.

²² *Generation Kill*, Putnam, New York, 2004, and *Sister in a Band of Brothers: Embedded with the 101st Airborne in Iraq*, Kansas University Press, Manhattan, 2005, respectively.

²³ See *Sir! No Sir!: The Suppressed Story of the GI movement to End the War in Vietnam*, Docurama, 2005, D Zeiger (dir.).

²⁴ A Barlow, *The Rise of the Blogosphere*, Praeger Publishers, Westport (CT), 2007, p. 160.

²⁵ For a discussion of 'adversarial' journalist, especially during Vietnam, see D K Thussu & D Freedman, 'Introduction', to *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7*, D K Thussu, and D Freedman (eds), Sage, London, 2003, p. 5.

²⁶ See R Weller (AP), 'Defense Dept. Blocking MySpace, YouTube'. *Yahoo! News*, 14 May 2007, accessed 14 May 2007,

<http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20070514/ap_en_ot/military_sites_blocked_5> and P Carter, 'Literary Battle Fatigue'. *Slate*, 9 May 2007, accessed 9 May 2007, <<http://slate.com/id/2965916?nav=tap3>>.

²⁷ See 'War book wins Booker blog prize'. *BBC News*, 14 May 2007, accessed 29 July 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6653781.stm>>.

²⁸ Both Buzzell's and Burden's blogs are still up and running, and in the case of Burden's book, one can easily enter blog names in a Google search and have immediate access to that soldier's blog. In addition, blog publishing has become a mini-phenomenon in that 'alternative' collections are appearing. For example, see *Baghdad burning: girl blog from Iraq*, The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, New York, 2006, a collection of 'Riverbend's' posts from the heart of war-torn Iraq. Riverbend is an Iraqi computer programmer who lives in Baghdad. Her blog first appeared in 2003.

²⁹ C Hedges, 'Accustomed to their own atrocities in Iraq, U.S. soldiers have become murderers'. *AlterNet*, 27 July 2007, accessed on 29 July 2007, <<http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/58101/>>.

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