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The Effectiveness of "Money as a Weapons System"

by Andrew Scranton

(English 2820)

At the onset of the Iraq War, politicians and generals were confident that, unlike in Vietnam, the war would result in a swift and complete victory that would not only overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime, but would also turn Iraq into a thriving democracy that would stand as a model of civilization for the rest of the Arab world. Instead the Iraq war (2003-2011) turned into a decade-long quagmire, with significant U.S. military presence still deployed in Iraq to this day. One of the more surprising things about the Iraq War is how it has failed to garner many depictions in the popular culture. Even now, many years after the war has officially ended there appears to be little desire to revisit or make sense of the conflict and what America ultimately accomplished through fiction. And of the few works of fiction that do appear that are set in Iraq, most of them are take the lens of a standard enlisted infantryman. They will inevitably be typical, simple, coming-of-age stories set in the early days of the invasion, when the conflict was simpler and easier to understand.

In contrast to this trend, Phil Klay's short story "Money as a Weapons System" is a complex, multi-faceted look at American efforts at nation building in the later period of the Iraq War. The story is about Nathan, a young, inexperienced Foreign Service Officer, who is put in command of an Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team. This team, consisting of only three members, none of whom has the necessary experience or qualifications for the job, is tasked with assisting the counterinsurgency efforts by reconstructing their Area of Operations. Their attempts to do this, including a women's business association that has never started a business, a beekeeping program for Iraqi widows, and fixing a water treatment plant that, despite millions of dollars spent, if made operational will destroy everything connected to it, are complete failures, marred by local corruption and their ignorance. They are not helped by an embassy that prioritizes projects that look good in photos or fulfill multiple "lines of engagement," such as training Iraqi widows how to keep bees, rather than the projects that stand to most benefit the Iraqi people, such as a women's health clinic. An entire convoy is sent to them solely so they can receive baseball uniforms, completely useless to the reconstruction effort but, because it was the idea of an influential constituent, a senator pressures their superiors to make use of them. They give the uniforms away as clothes to children and fake a series of photos of them playing baseball. The story ends after these photos being taken, with an exclamation of "success." But, as Nathan says at the start of the story, "Success was a matter of perspective. In Iraq it had to be. There was no Omaha Beach, no Vicksburg Campaign, not even an Alamo to signal a clear defeat" (Klay 77). The question of whether, in the end, anything of importance has actually been accomplished in Iraq is, as it is in real life, left ambiguous.

This story is especially noteworthy in that it, in contrast to all of the other stories included in the collection, as well as most war literature in general, the protagonist is not a member of the military. Instead, he is a Foreign Service Officer, with a completely different background, objective, and perspective from traditional soldiers. Though he is working in an Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team, which, unlike a traditional Provincial Reconstruction Team, is embedded with a U.S. Brigade Combat Team and works closely with them, (Stone, 148) he does not report to the military chain of command. Thus, he has a much higher degree of agency than traditional soldier; he does not merely carry out the tasks assigned to him like an enlisted man, instead he is in a position of leadership where he has to use his own judgement as to what his team should do and how they do it. Thus, throughout the story he constantly questions not only what tasks are the most important to the

reconstruction and how they should be accomplished. This questioning, reflective type of protagonist allows Klay to compel the reader to ponder the same questions that Nathan ponders during the story naturally, without the story feeling didactic or patronizing. The intense questioning of and broader look at American policy in Iraq is the most unique and compelling aspect of the story, setting it apart from most other works of war literature.

Another compelling element of this story is its use of satire. Klay understands that in order for readers to remain engrossed in a story with upsetting or depressing elements like “Money as a Weapons System” has in abundance, humor must be used to make the story more palatable. He does this masterfully in “Money as a Weapons System.” Klay’s grasp of the absurdity of the American occupation rightfully merits comparisons made to Joseph Heller (*Docx*). For example, consider the following lines:

“USAID claims agriculture should be employing thirty percent of the population,” I said. “Right,” said Bob. “But the whole system broke down after we trashed the state-run industries.” “Fantastic,” I said. “It wasn’t my idea,” said Bob. “We remade the Ministry of Agriculture on free market principles, but the invisible hand of the market started planting IEDs” (Klay 81).

This exchange uses humor to not only entertain the reader, but, at the same time, reveal important story information in a memorable way. A dry description of how the U.S. closed Iraqi state-run industries lead to unemployed farmers becoming jihadists, while accurate, would not engage the reader like the hilarious, and just as accurate, description of how “...the invisible hand of the market started planting IEDs” (Klay 81).” Few stories about war, particularly stories about a war as recent as the Iraq War, are brave enough to risk causing offense mine humor from wars absurd elements as “Money as a Weapons System” does, and this makes this story stand out from other works of war literature.

However, while the humor of the story is self-evident to most readers and results in a stronger, more engaging story, many of the story’s important details and background information necessary for further understanding of the plot will be excluded from them if they do not have more than a layman’s knowledge of the Foreign Service. If the reader is unsure at the onset of the story what the Foreign Service is, what a provincial reconstruction team is and how it differs from an embedded provincial reconstruction team, what “IRRF2 Funds” are, or what a civil affairs brigade does, he will not be any more enlightened at the story’s end. Knowledge of these elements is not strictly necessary for understanding, much less enjoying, the story, but without it the reader may, at times, feel as if they are not understanding the full picture. This is, in a story that seeks to paint a broad picture of the conflict, at times counterproductive to the story’s overall ethos.

Yet, despite these occasional cryptic references, the story remains deeply captivating due to its many strengths. Its unconventional protagonist and dark humor draw the reader in, while also bringing them to contemplate the current state of Iraq and what America has actually achieved by invading. No other piece of contemporary fiction, or any other form of popular culture for that matter, actively invites this kind of critical engagement with the Iraq War and its consequences as “Money as a Weapons System” does.

If, as the story suggests, success is a matter of perspective (Klay 77), then the question of whether or not the Iraq War was a success will depend upon your individual perspective. Some characters in the story, like the professor, believe it was disastrous for Iraq. Others, like Nathan, remain unsure. Regardless of the readers own conclusion, the story achieves a “success” of its own by getting the reader to question their own perspective.

Works Cited

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