

FRAMING CONFLICT: THE LITERARY WAR JOURNALISM OF JOHN SACK

By

JOHN KEITH SALIBA

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To My Mother

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
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John Keith Saliba

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My study employed qualitative framing analysis to examine and identify dominant frames within the war reportage of John Sack. One of the only people to cover each of America's wars over the last 50 years, Sack was also a leading practitioner of literary journalism, a genre that eschews the objectivity ideal set forth by traditional journalism in favor of interjecting a subjective point of view informed by the journalist's observations, life experiences and worldview. Sack and other practitioners of literary journalism generally argue that this approach, more so than traditional journalism, helps reveal a "higher truth" about the issues in question.

Sack's literary war journalism—four books and three major magazine articles—was frame analyzed for this study, and several dominant and master frames were revealed. The study found a marked framing difference between Sack's Vietnam War coverage and that which followed. Literary journalists, while long hailed for their ability to artfully tell true stories, are still journalists first and foremost, charged with conveying an accurate portrayal of the nonfiction events they cover. Few studies have attempted to analyze how literary journalists like Sack frame the issues and people they write about, the role of subjectivity in that process, and its implications for the conveyance of truth. I hope this study will be the first step toward filling that void.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

John Sack was born in New York to middle-class Jewish parents in March 1930. That humble beginning, however, belies the extraordinary life that followed. A stringer for the *Mamaroneck* (N.Y.) *Daily Times* at 15, Sack would go on to graduate cum laude from Harvard, even while managing to edit *The Harvard Crimson* and string for *United Press* and the *Boston Globe* during his time in Cambridge. Eventually, such heavy hitters as *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Playboy* and others would routinely come calling for his literary services.

He authored hundreds of magazine articles and 10 books during his long career, including *The Butcher: The Ascent of Yerupaja* (1952), based on his experiences as a *UP* correspondent covering the 1950 summit of Yerupaja, at the time the highest unclimbed peak in the Americas; *Report from Practically Nowhere* (1959), a humorous account of his travels through the world's 13 smallest countries; *The Man-Eating Machine* (1973), a collection of previously published *Esquire* articles; *Fingerprint* (1983), a philosophical tome reflecting Sack's take on man and modern society; and *Dragonhead: The True Story of the Godfather of Chinese Crime – His Rise and Fall* (2001), a 12-year odyssey in which Sack ate, traveled and sometimes lived with some of the world's most ruthless criminals.

But Sack also proved more than willing to take on controversial subject matter, as well. This is perhaps best evidenced by his book *An Eye for an Eye: The Story of Jews Who Sought Revenge for the Holocaust* (1993). Sack uncovered the story quite by accident when he met a woman named Lola Potok in 1986 who claimed to be a Jewish Auschwitz survivor who had gone on to run a brutal internment camp for the Office of State Security in post-war Poland. Initially believing the camps were intended for former Nazis and their collaborators, Sack eventually learned that most of Lola's prisoners were actually German civilians: men, women

and children who died by the thousands due to torture, starvation, disease, and outright murder. In all, Sack and others estimate that between 60,000 and 80,000 of the 200,000 German civilians interned died in Jewish-run Polish prisons and concentration camps immediately after the war (Sack, 1993; Fuhrig, 1996; Pinchuk, 1991; Whitney, 1994; De Zayas, 1993; Davies, 1982; Chodakiewicz, 2004).

Sack, believing he had found a story worth telling, decided to follow the trail where it led. He could not have anticipated the firestorm that would soon ensue. Still, after some initial research—and being rejected by 10 magazines, including *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone* and *The New Yorker*—Sack was finally able to publish the first article, “Lola’s Revenge,” in *California* magazine in 1988 (Stewart, 1997).

But it was when Sack tried to expand his initial research into a full length book that pressure truly began to mount. Sack tried six different agents before he could find one to represent the book, and had to go through 12 publishers before finally finding one that agreed to sign the book deal. Sack, who had already interviewed more than 200 people in seven countries and amassed more than \$100,000 in personal debt to research the story, began to worry that his book would never see the light of day (Stewart, 1997).

Finally, the scholarly house Basic Books in 1993 agreed to publish *An Eye for An Eye*, as did German publisher Piper Verlag two years later. The German publishing house’s commitment to the book was to be short-lived, however, for in early 1995 Verlag abruptly pulled the contract, ordering the 6,000 books already printed to be destroyed in a move eerily reminiscent of the prewar Nuremberg book burnings (Streitfeld, 1995).

After being initially ignored by most of the mainstream press, some prominent reviewers commenced a ruthless excoriation of the book. The charge was led by Harvard professor of

government Daniel Goldhagen, who in a 5,000-word diatribe for *The New Republic* (1993) accused Sack of everything from shoddy research practices and the willful misleading of the public to drawing a moral equivalency between what happened in postwar Poland and the Holocaust. Goldhagen even hinted that Sack was an anti-Semite (Goldhagen, 1993; Goldhagen, 1994; Wiener, 1994; Checinski, 1994).

Sack, a Jew who had once been voted “most religious” in his Torah class (Lombardi, 1994), vehemently denied the charges, stressing that his book was less about Jewish revenge than Jewish redemption (Sack, 1995). Indeed, as Sack himself pointed out in the book and elsewhere, some Jews took mercy on their captives, protecting and feeding them whenever possible. And most Jewish officers, including Lola, had abandoned their posts in disgust by the end of 1945. Nor, wrote Sack, did he ever suggest that the Polish camps made Nazis of Jews (Sack, 1993; Sack, 1994; Sack, 1995 ).

Sack began to pick up supporters as time wore on, however, especially as the crimes of one of the book’s protagonists, Solomon Morel, a ruthless and brutal camp commander, came to light. Morel, who commanded the Swietophlowiche camp in Poland in 1945, fled to Israel in 1992 when post-communist authorities began investigating the more than 1,500 prisoner deaths – more than half of those in his charge – that occurred during his 10-month tenure as commander. Israel and Poland do not have an extradition agreement, and Morel, now in ill health, continues to live in Tel Aviv (Lombardi, 1994; Oppenheim, 1994; Sher, 1999).

Still, resistance to Sack and his book continued. Scheduled to give a talk entitled “Revenge and Redemption” at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum four years after his book was published, Sack’s speech was abruptly cancelled by museum director Walter Reich, who called his views “not appropriate” (Streitfeld, 1997; Opinion, 1997). And Sack would later be blasted

for giving aid and comfort to Holocaust deniers after he was asked to speak at a 2001 international convention for those who do not believe the Holocaust happened (Cooper & Brackman, 2001). Sack, ever on the lookout for a chance to peel back the curtain of the aberrant psyche—an enduring theme throughout his career—decided to pen a behind-the-scenes look for *Esquire*. The following passage captures well the ethos of Sack’s journalistic impulse:

The invitation surprised me, for I am a Jew who’s written about the Holocaust and (for Chrissakes, I feel like adding) certainly hasn’t denied it. To my eyes, however, the invitation, which came from the Institute for Historical Review...the central asylum for the delusion that the Germans didn’t kill any Jews and that the Holocaust is, quote, unquote, the Hoax of the Twentieth Century, was not just a wonderment: it was a golden opportunity, a golden-engraved temptation. We journalists usually sit at the outer edge of occasions. The Institute offered me what every journalist hungers for: the feast of unhampered access. Its letter was a safe-conduct pass to a country so fog-bound that you and I can’t discern it. Who are the Holocaust deniers? What are they like behind closed doors? I’d been invited to mingle with them like a mole in Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest and then ascend to the lectern to tell them off. (Sack, 2001, p. 1)

But Sack’s real forte was always war, either those that he covered firsthand, or those heart-wrenching tales that he later reconstructed through time and meticulous research. Indeed, Sack and his unique brand of literary journalism would provide the world with some of its most enduring and compelling tales of mankind’s gravest of endeavors. The only person to cover each of America’s wars over the last 50 years, Sack’s reportage would help shed new light on everything from Army life during the Korean War and the horrors of Vietnam to the sensation of rolling across the Kuwaiti desert in a 60-ton Abrams tank. At 71—just three years before he would die of complications following a bone-marrow transplant—Sack once again saddled up for the ride as U.S. troops tried to root out al-Qaeda fighters in the mountains of Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks.

Yet, even as he endeavored to reveal what he considered to be a more truthful portrait of war by employing many of the novelist’s most cherished tricks of the trade, including scene-by-scene construction, dialogue, metaphor, foreshadowing, etc., Sack nevertheless was always a

journalist first and foremost. While some of his fellow New Journalism pioneers like Michael Herr and Hunter S. Thompson often fictionalized certain elements of their journalism in order to get to what they considered a “higher truth,” Sack always believed in the axiom “truth is stranger than fiction.” His devotion was to rigorous accuracy, often spending years researching his subjects, checking and rechecking sources, all to ensure that the final product was as close to truth as human fallacy allows.

But a devotion to accuracy did not necessarily translate to a dedication to *objectivity*. Indeed, much like Herr, Thompson, Tom Wolfe and other literary luminaries, Sack had little faith in traditional journalism’s ability to convey truth, especially the truth about war (Stewart, 1997). “I myself don’t believe in objectivity—no New Journalist does,” Sack once said in an interview (Schroeder, 1992, p. 20). Instead, he believed that in order to get to the closest version of truth possible it was vitally important to inject a subjective point of view informed by his observations, life experiences and worldview. And if the reader was unaware of the subjectivity of Sack’s account, so much the better.

I’m playing a diabolical trick on the reader. I want the reader to feel that he or she is being handed raw information, raw facts, that objective facts have just been plunked in front of the reader and haven’t passed through anybody else’s consciousness. This is a shuck. Obviously everything has passed through my consciousness, and I’m just taking advantage of this whole American belief in objectivity. *I’m merely recounting the incidents that are important to me, and recounting them the way I happened to see them* [emphasis mine]. Somebody else, anybody else, could go through the same experience and see it quite differently. (Schroeder, 1992, p. 20)

But if Sack and other literary journalists readily admit that the events they recount have been filtered through their own consciousnesses, their subjective points of view dictating which elements are to be emphasized and which not, what are the implications for their stated goal of reporting the closest version of truth possible? Indeed, while Sack’s devotion to accuracy was legendary, he nevertheless approached each story with a distinctive point of view, framing for

the reader the issues, events and people as he saw fit. The manner in which Sack framed the events he wrote about, the role of subjectivity in that framing process, and the implications for the accurate portrayal of nonfiction subjects are the principal concerns of this study.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Literary Journalism**

Literary journalism, known alternatively as creative nonfiction, narrative journalism, and the New Journalism of the 1960s (Wolfe & Johnson, 1973), has been a vital genre of American and British journalism since at least the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hartsock, 2000). Throughout its evolution, various sub-genres have emerged which focus on specific arenas of interest, such as social justice Muckraking, environmentalism, literary sports journalism, personality profiles, and literary war journalism (Kerrane & Yagoda, 1997). But before we delve deeper into the relationship between literary journalism and war reporting, let us first establish a working definition of just what constitutes “literary journalism.”

We can begin by establishing what it is *not*. Literary journalism is not conventional journalism, which espouses direct language, the inverted pyramid (putting the most important aspect of the story in the first sentence, with information then included in descending order of importance), and direct quotation with attribution (Weber, 1980; Kerrane & Yagoda, 1997). Literary journalism, while also nonfiction, is concerned first and foremost with narrative—it tells a story, complete with a beginning, middle and end, an approach that runs directly counter to conventional journalism’s inverted pyramid.

Other aspects may include the use of first/third-person voice, symbolism, metaphor, foreshadowing, immersion reporting, digression, and an intimate voice that is informal, human, frank and/or ironic. (Murphy, 1974; Sims & Kramer, 1995). Wolfe & Johnson (1973) identified still other characteristics of the genre including the use of status-of-life details (ordinary details of life/environment which work to better illustrate the subject or character), reconstructed dialogue (to more faithfully depict how subjects speak and interact), and scene-by-scene

construction, (which enables the reader to almost “watch” as the story unfolds), as well (Wolfe & Johnson, 1973). In short, literary journalism employs many of the tools of the novelist. Still, with notable exceptions like Herr and Thompson aside, literary journalists do not fictionalize, but rather “work within the boundaries of dialogue and scenarios that they have either witnessed or had conveyed to them by witnesses or documentation of such events” (Royal & Tankard, 2002, p. 4).

Indeed, whether literary or conventional, “journalism implies a process of active fact-gathering – not just working from memory or sensory observation but doing what reporters call ‘reporting’,” (Kerrane & Yagoda, 1997, p.13). Ultimately, although literary journalism should read like the best fiction, it draws much greater credibility with audiences because of its detailed realism, in other words, “the simple fact that the reader knows all this actually happened,” (Wolfe & Johnson, 1973, p. 34).

But perhaps the most controversial technique employed by literary journalists is the subjective approach they take in reporting the events they cover (Stewart, 1997). Subjectivity refers to an individual’s feelings, beliefs or perspective concerning a particular event (Solomon, 2005). Allowing one’s subjective feelings, beliefs or perspective to influence how a story is reported runs directly counter to conventional journalism’s stated commitment to objectively reflect the “world as it is, without bias or distortion of any sort” (Stephens, 1988, p.264). Sack, of course, did not believe in the ability of objectivity to accurately relate events, arguing instead that a subjective approach to storytelling was the only “kind of journalism [that] gets to the real truth” (Stewart, 1997, p. 9). Chimerical attempts at objectivity only resulted in shallow and distorted reporting, Sack believed. At one time a traditional journalist for newspapers and television alike, Sack felt unduly constrained by the ethos of objectivity.

In those days I felt, here I am in possession of the truth and here I am writing stories that don't communicate the truth. Why do so many reporters become alcoholic and cynical in their old age? Because they've spent a lifetime knowing the truth and reporting something else. (Stewart, 1997, p. 10)

### **Literary War Journalism**

Literary approaches to war coverage have been with us for quite some time (Roth, 1997). In the beginning, most of its practitioners were of the part time variety, with various literary luminaries of the time trying their hands—usually quite successfully. As the genre has evolved, it is now mainly the purview of fulltime journalists, who nevertheless believe that a literary treatment is the surest way to reveal the true nature of war. As we have seen, literary journalism strives to tell a story which focuses on the human dimension of events. War, by its very nature, seems tailor-made for such an approach, as the issues involved—heroism/cowardice, self-sacrifice, suffering, redemption, loss—strike at the very essence of what it means to be human.

One of the earliest practitioners of literary war journalism was venerated American poet Walt Whitman (1883). His classic reportage about the Civil War clash at Chancellorsville in 1863, reprinted 20 years later in his collection, *Specimen Days*, foreshadowed many of the central elements that would come to personify the unique approach taken by literary war journalism (Whitman, 1883). Whitman, who during the war volunteered as an orderly in various Union combat hospitals, was actually not present at Chancellorsville, but instead reconstructed an account from in-depth interviews with the soldiers who were, providing the reader with a soldier's-eye view of the battlefield. In this way, Whitman was perhaps one of the first to move war reporting beyond the realm of more conventional fare such as a strategy, supply lines and ground taken, to the far more revealing perspective of what it was actually like to *be* in the midst of war.

His style is breathless and exhausting, filled with stream-of-consciousness rants and sentence fragments—all in an attempt to convey the confusion, exhaustion and fear of combat. And there is detail aplenty, as well. Whitman’s piece grimly recounts the suffering of the soldiers, describing in graphic detail their screams of pain, the piles of amputated limbs discarded like so much unwanted “refuse,” and the fear and chaos of the Rebel victory. And it is here that Whitman demonstrates yet another feature of literary journalism—the unabashed perspective of the author. Indeed, Whitman makes no attempt at objectivity, clearly identifying himself as a Unionist and decrying the horror of the Rebel advance. In the end, Whitman knew that a conventional treatment of the battle would only result in an egregiously incomplete picture.

Yet another literary luminary who eventually decided to apply his talent to war coverage, Richard Harding Davis (1897) began as a novelist, playwright and travel writer before emerging as perhaps the preeminent war correspondent of the late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Dashing, handsome and with a flare for dramatic literature, Davis came to personify the image of the adventuresome, swashbuckling war correspondent. In 1897, at the behest of friend and publisher of the New York *Journal*, William Randolph Hearst, Davis set out to cover the Cuban insurrection against their Spanish overlords.

There he witnessed the execution of Adolfo Rodriguez, 20, convicted of bearing arms against the Spanish Empire. What resulted was *The Death of Rodriquez* (Davis, 1897), a poignant, set-piece tale rich with atmosphere and detail. Here, Davis chose to use no dialogue at all, instead acting as third-person narrator to guide the reader, moment by moment, thought by thought, through the execution. Davis’ ability for scene setting is formidable, and would no doubt render a contemporary film director green with envy. Indeed, Davis’ descriptive scene-

setting is so on the mark, the reader feels almost as if he/she were either present on that early morning, or watching it unfold on a movie screen.

As with Whitman, Davis' perspective is clearly evident as well. Friend of both Hearst and then-Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt—both of whom wanted the United States to enter the war on behalf of the Cubans—Davis appeared to hold this view as well. He is unabashedly pro-Rodriguez (comparing him to Revolutionary War patriot Ethan Allen) and pro-Cuban (again, comparing them to American colonists in their struggle against Great Britain). Davis also employs Wolfe's status details—a cigarette and scapular—to convey both Rodriguez's bravery and isolation, respectively.

Early literary war journalism was not the sole purview of men, however. Martha Gellhorn (1938), the third wife of Ernest Hemingway, was nevertheless a literary icon in her own right, penning novels, essays and poetry, all the while covering nearly every major conflict of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1938, Gellhorn traveled to Spain to cover that country's ongoing civil war between the Franco fascists and the Republican loyalists. A well traveled "citizen of the world," Gellhorn spoke fluent Spanish and was intimately acquainted with the country and its people. In her piece *The Third Winter* (1938), Gellhorn employs a literary device not unlike the one used by John Steinbeck in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, which deftly tells the story of Depression-era westward migration by juxtaposing the story of the Joad family with that of the larger country.

Gellhorn accomplishes the same feat when she visits a Barcelonan family under the auspices of having a picture framed. Gellhorn then proceeds to shift the narrative between her experiences with the family on that single afternoon and the experiences of the country at large. Again employing status details, Gellhorn uses items and conversational moments to introduce the larger picture of the struggles of Republican Spain. For example, the family patriarch's lack

of wood for the frame introduces the privations present in the country; admiring the couples' granddaughter introduces conditions in a bombed-out orphanage once visited by Gellhorn and so on. This unique approach, employed with Gellhorn's "Hemingwayesque" economy of words, helps to render a truer picture of the war's human cost than much of the conventional reportage of the time.

Even Steinbeck (1943) himself lent his considerable talents to covering war. His work as a special correspondent for the New York *Herald-Tribune* in 1943, later published in his collection *Once There Was a War* (1958), covered the Allied advance through the Mediterranean and up the Italian boot. As the Allies were fighting to control Sicily, Steinbeck penned what is one of the shortest, yet highly revered pieces of literary war coverage in history. Employing third-person narrator, Steinbeck refers to himself only as the "Correspondent," and, contrary to most conventional WWII reportage, confined his story to only what he directly observed. This may sound completely intuitive but for a several factors: Steinbeck, like many of his predecessors, was convinced that conventional approaches focused too much on strategic concerns and bland pronouncements of advances and retreats.

Instead, Steinbeck informs the reader from the outset that, if a correspondent were to report what he "might have seen"—that is, one who was honest and not beholden to any grand commitment to the war effort—the horrors of war would be laid bare. Of course, Steinbeck then recounts just the sorts of horrors that would never find their way into conventional treatments. Only in the piece's last sentence does Steinbeck include that "General Mark Clark's 5<sup>th</sup> Army advanced two kilometers today," an ironic juxtaposition of his "honest" report and the reports normally seen from conventional sources.

Shortly after the U.S. ended the war with Japan by dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *New Yorker* writer John Hersey wanted to document the event and its effect on ordinary Japanese citizens. Through in-depth interviews with survivors, Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946) was able to reconstruct not only the event itself, but the experiences, pain, thoughts and emotions of those who survived. In clean, straightforward prose—absent of sentimentality—Hersey was nevertheless able to weave an intensely empathetic and humanitarian retelling of Hiroshima's aftermath, for the first time portraying Japanese civilians as human beings, rather than the monsters of American war propaganda. Hersey concerns himself with the retelling of the story through the eyes of those who lived it, ordinary Japanese who were confronted with all the cowardice/heroism, confusion and pain that only such an event can engender. Like Steinbeck, Hersey chooses not to dwell on strategy or the technological aspects of an atomic bomb, preferring instead to examine the human costs. When the story ran, it took up the entire issue of the *New Yorker* and is still considered one of the landmark examples of literary journalism.

As we have seen, many of those who had previously taken a literary journalistic approach to covering war deviated in varying ways from the rules of conventional journalism. But it was not until the 1960s and Vietnam that a new wave of journalists began to loudly question whether conventional journalistic practice had *any* value when it came to covering war. Indeed, literary war correspondents like Michael Herr argued that such coverage provided only a one-dimensional, even skewed perspective of what was actually happening on the ground.

In his 1977 book *Dispatches*, an expanded version of his *Esquire* magazine coverage of the Vietnam War, Herr contended that “conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it; all it could do was to take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into communications pudding” (Herr, 1977, p. 218). Instead,

Herr was determined to employ literary journalistic techniques to expose what he called the war's "grinning death mask concealed beneath a thousand conventional reports" (Herr, 1977, p. 23)

But while literary journalism is nonfiction, Herr felt no compunction over fictionalizing portions of the narrative or even to creating such composite characters as "Day Tripper" and "Mayhew" to reveal what he considered the "deeper truth" of the war. As we have seen, immersion reporting, where the writer spends months or even years with his or her subjects to gain the fullest knowledge possible, is a central characteristic of literary journalism. Consequently, Herr believed that since he had spent so much time roaming the countryside in Vietnam and had met so many soldiers, he was free to blur the line between fact and fiction by in order to better tell the larger story.

They are totally fictional characters. I have told people over the years that there are fictional aspects to 'Dispatches,' and they look betrayed. They look heartbroken, as if it isn't true anymore. (But) I always carried a notebook. I had this idea – I remember endlessly writing down dialogues. It was all I was really there to do. Very few lines were literally invented. A lot of lines are put into mouths of composite characters. Sometimes I tell a story as if I were present when I wasn't, which wasn't difficult – I was so immersed in that talk, so full of it and steeped in it. (Ciotti, 1990, p. 22)

Literary war coverage is practiced well beyond the halls of American journalism, as well. Belorussian journalist Svetlana Alexiyevich (1992) set out to chronicle the effects of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, not only the soldiers who fought it, but family members and even government officials. The title refers to the sealed, zinc coffins in which the Soviets would send back their dead. Family members were forbidden from having them opened, and consequently were never able to see their loved ones. Using in-depth interviews, Alexiyevich managed to convey to the average former Soviet citizen just what they had lost in the 10-year war, while also capturing the perspective of those who fought there.

Literary journalists have done their level best to represent the modern face of warfare, as well. Philadelphia *Inquirer* writer Mark Bowden proves that the genre of literary war coverage is continuing to evolve. Relying on after-the-fact in-depth interviews, Bowden's *Black Hawk Down* (1999) nevertheless broke new ground in his approach to covering the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu involving U.S. troops and Somali warlords. While his predecessors focus mainly on the human cost of war *after* battle, Bowden instead manages to convey the feelings of confusion, fear and chaos *during* battle. Indeed, told in chronological order, *Black Hawk Down* endeavors to provide readers with a moment-by-moment account of the thoughts and actions of the men who fought on those dusty streets. The result is a riveting narrative that, were it not completely true, would be the stuff of the most compelling war fiction.

English reporter Chris Ayres' *War Reporting for Cowards* (2005) demonstrates that war reporting can be gritty, poignant, informative—and downright funny all at the same time. A Los Angeles-based entertainment writer for the London *Times*, Ayres managed to survive as an embedded reporter with U.S. forces for just the first 9 days of the 2003 Iraq War. A classic fish-out-of-water tale, Ayres, a soft man and admitted hypochondriac clearly used to the good life, manages nevertheless to convey the uncertainty of combat while stuffed into the back of an American Humvee. All of the details of soldierly life are here, from the searing heat and grinding boredom to how to get sand out of one's shorts—even the sheer terror of a potential gas attack. Ayres' book also provides keen insights into the embed system, as well as the larger issues of how man deals with the fear and uncertainty of combat.

### **Framing**

Framing in mass communications is the process by which communicators, intentionally or unintentionally, construct a point of view that helps foster a particular interpretation of a given situation (Kuypers, 2006). The roots of mass communications framing can be traced to Walter

Lippman's landmark *Public Opinion* (1922), in which Lippman contended that the news media are a primary source of "the pictures in our heads," an enunciation of his belief that the public's media-fostered images of the external environment do not reflect the world as it truly is (Lippman, 1922). Bernard Cohen famously expanded upon this thesis when he announced that "while the media may not tell us what to think, they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about" (Cohen, 1963, p.13).

But it was not until McCombs and Shaw's seminal study of mass media effects during the 1968 presidential campaign that the speculations of those like Lippman and Cohen would finally be tested. What has come to be known as the "Chapel Hill Study" (McCombs and Shaw were young professors at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill at the time), demonstrated that the mass media set the agenda of issues for the campaign by increasing the salience of issues among the public. In short, issues most covered in the media, after a certain lag period, became the issues deemed most important by voters (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Thus was born agenda-setting, a heuristically vigorous theory that has spawned hundreds of follow-up studies throughout the world. Initially, most of these studies focused on first-level agenda-setting—the salience of *objects*, or those things toward which our attention is focused or that we have an opinion about. In traditional agenda-setting, objects usually refer to public issues, but as the theory has expanded, "the kinds of objects that can define an agenda in the media and among the public are virtually limitless" (McCombs, 2004, p.70).

And agenda-setting research continues to expand. Indeed, where first-level agenda-setting is concerned with the transfer of object salience from the media agenda to that of the public, second-level agenda-setting focuses on the salience transfer of *attributes*, or "those characteristics and properties that fill out the picture of each object...the entire range of...traits

that characterizes an object” (McCombs, 2004, p. 70). Again, the kinds of attributes that can be identified are virtually limitless, ranging from such basic physical characteristics as “blonde” or “tall” to more abstract traits like “competent,” “dishonest,” “chaotic,” “virtuous,” etc. In short, where object salience tells us which issues to think about, attribute salience tells us about which *aspects* we should think. Revisiting Cohen’s famous declaration about media influence, McCombs raises an important question:

The second-level of agenda-setting further suggests that the media not only tell us what to think about, but that they also tell us *how to think* about some objects. Could the consequences of this be that the media sometimes do tell us *what to think*? (McCombs, 2004, p. 71).

Indeed, scores of second-level agenda-setting studies since the 1970s, many of them focusing on attribute agenda-setting regarding political candidates, seem to support the notion that the news media influence how we think about issues. Several studies, including the 1976 U.S. and 1996 Spanish presidential campaigns found that the media successfully transferred its attribute agenda concerning presidential candidates to the public (Becker & McCombs, 1978; Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar & Llamas, 2000).

Agenda-setting, both first and second level, can be seen as the parent theory from which framing is derived. A frame is the “central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration” of certain attributes (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss & Ghanem, 1991). Facts are neutral until “being embedded in a frame or storyline that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others” (Gameson, 1989, p. 157; Hall, 1982, p. 59). While a frame can sometimes be a single attribute, not all attributes can be considered frames. Instead, it is perhaps better to think of a frame as a *bundle* of certain attributes—sometimes referred to as the “central theme” of an issue—with “the power to structure

thought, to shape how we think about public issues, political candidates or other objects in the news” (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2001, p. 11).

Framing, then, involves the selection and emphasis of some aspects of an issue (and the exclusion of others) in such a way “as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing can be said to be a step beyond second-level agenda-setting, whereby the media not only transfer attribute salience, but begin to provide “contextual cues or frames with which to evaluate those subjects” in question (Johnston, 1990, p. 337). Indeed, “whereas agenda-setting would allow us to count the instances of press comments on [a] topic, framing analysis allows us to discover how the comments shape our perceptions of the topic,” (Kuypers & Cooper, 2005, p. 2).

When we frame facts or events in a particular way, we encourage others to see those facts and events in that same particular way. In this sense, framing can be understood as taking some aspects of our reality and making them more easily noticed than other aspects. (Kuypers, 2006, p. 7).

An examination of Entman’s (1991) study of the news coverage surrounding the shooting down of two civilian airliners during the 1980s provides an excellent example of the power of framing. Employing comparative framing analysis, Entman compared news coverage of the downing of Korean Airlines flight 007 by the Soviets in 1983 with news reports of the USS *Vincennes*’ shoot down of Iran Air 655 over the Persian Gulf in 1988. On each flight, all aboard were killed. Entman found that the KAL incident was framed as a moral outrage and emphasized the evil, crass nature of the Soviet Union while de-emphasizing the fact that flight 007 had strayed into Soviet airspace. By contrast, the Iran Air incident was framed simply as a tragedy and emphasized the technical problems experienced by the *Vincennes*. These findings demonstrate how selective framing can impose a particular interpretation of the events in

question. When some relevant attributes are emphasized at the expense of others, a dominant frame is created which can render contrary information of “such low salience as to be of little practical use to most audience members” (Entman, 1991, p. 21).

In another example, a study involving the coverage of a Ku Klux Klan rally not only analyzed for frames, but measured audience response to the different frames discovered (Nelson, Clawson & Oxley, 1997). The first news story framed the rally as a free speech issue, with heavy use of quotes and background information that emphasized the Klan’s right to march and speak. The second story, by contrast, framed the issue as one of public disorder, which emphasized the often violent and disruptive nature of Klan marchers. Again, the results demonstrate the power of frames: “Participants who viewed the free speech story expressed more tolerance for the Klan than those participants who watched the public disorder story” (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 567).

Indeed, as Kuypers and Cooper (2005) write:

When journalists frame, they construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted in a specific way. Thus, journalists can, knowingly or unknowingly, guide the interpretation of readers toward a particular point of view. (Kuypers & Cooper, 2005, p. 2)

### **Methodology**

Sack’s four journalistic books and three major magazines articles about war were frame analyzed for this study. Each chapter consists of three segments: a background section providing historical context, an analysis section featuring relevant excerpts from the narrative, and a conclusion enumerating the dominant frames identified. A succinct name is assigned to each dominant frame. These labels are arbitrary and represent only my best attempt to boil down these frames into manageable packages. Again, the operative word is *dominant*. As explained in the literature review, there can be many frames within a given narrative. But this study is concerned only with those frames that are prevalent and recurrent – in other words, only frames sufficiently

dominant to plausibly influence readers' interpretation of events. Dominant frames are identified by examining the attributes chosen for emphasis, as well as pertinent anecdotes, quotes and Sack's personal interjections. For example, if Sack chose to emphasize only the attributes that cast combat conditions as "difficult," and then reinforced that emphasis with likeminded anecdotes, quotes and personal interjections, it can credibly be assumed that most reasonable readers would conceive of the combat conditions as difficult. Likewise, so-called *master frames* can be present, as well (Kuypers, 2005). A master frame comprises the dominant frames of a narrative and can dramatically shape the way readers interpret the overall event. Expanding on our example above, a war narrative encompassing such dominant frames as **Difficult Combat Conditions, Corrupt Leadership, Invincible Enemy** and **Reluctant Soldiers**, could be said to put forth the master frame **Un-winnable War**.

## CHAPTER 3 FROM HERE TO SHIMBASHI

### **Background**

As World War II drew to a close in the summer of 1945, Japan, which had controlled the Korean peninsula for the previous 35 years, was driven out by Soviet and U.S. forces in the north and south, respectively. Each government was eager to form a sphere of influence in the former Japanese colony, so the powers agreed to partition the country at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, with a communist-backed government above the demarcation line, and a U.S.-supported regime to the south. North Korea's Kim Il-Sung, who had risen to power with Soviet backing, and Syngman Rhee, the United States's preferred strongman, each jockeyed to reunite the peninsula under his own control. Border clashes were frequent, as were guerilla actions north and south of the parallel. Neither could gain advantage; however, the United States—partly because of its rapid demobilization immediately after the war, and partly because U.S. leaders placed a much higher premium on Eastern Europe—had left South Korean forces woefully undersupplied and trained. Kim, bolstered by generous Soviet military aid, including tanks and aircraft, came to see full-scale invasion as his only chance of reunifying the peninsula under communist rule. He petitioned for, and finally got, Soviet premier Joseph Stalin's blessing to invade (Varhola, 2000).

On June 25, 1950, a North Korean army of more than 400,000 troops flooded south across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, crushing the hopelessly outclassed Republic of Korea forces and occupying the capital city of Seoul just three days later. The United States, severely hamstrung by its massive demobilization following World War II, could intervene only piecemeal at first, committing an under-strength task force from Japan on July 5. Task Force Smith was quickly overrun by North Korean troops. By September, the U.S. Eighth Army, along with the decimated remnants of the ROK forces, was quickly pushed back to a small perimeter in and around the South Korean port

city of Pusan, nestled in the southeast corner of the country. There, U.S. and allied troops fought a desperate holding action while men and material poured in to bolster Pusan's defenses.

Hampered by a stiff defense, mounting allied air power, and their own poor logistical system, the North Koreans stalled at Pusan, unable to take the last piece of ground in South Korea (Tucker, Nichols, Peirpaoli, Roberts & Zehr, 2002).

It was then that American General Douglas MacArthur, supreme commander of United Nations forces, launched his Operation Chromite, a daring amphibious landing near the west coast city of Inchon, far to the rear of North Korean lines. Executed by elements of the X Corps, the landing was an overwhelming success, routing the North Koreans and nearly trapping the bulk of the communist army in a vice grip between the corps to the north and a revitalized Eighth Army to the south. X Corps, responsible for Korea's western front, raced north and retook Seoul, while the Eighth Army in the east swept up the peninsula, driving the bewildered remnants of Kim's army back across the parallel. MacArthur, who famously stated that, "There is no substitute for victory," pushed U.N. forces north in order to reunify the peninsula under conditions advantageous to the United States (Tucker et al, 2002).

The Chinese, under Chairman Mao Zedong, warned that any advance to the Yalu River, which marked the border between North Korea and China, would be seen as an act of war. U.S. President Harry Truman, believing Mao was bluffing, approved MacArthur's advance. But on November 1, 1950, some 300,000 Chinese troops poured across the Yalu, swarming the overwhelmed U.N. forces and driving them south once again. In late November, as bitter cold and snow blew down from Manchuria, approximately 30,000 U.N. troops—mostly U.S. marines and soldiers—were caught and nearly enveloped by more than four times that many Chinese at the Chosin Reservoir in north-central Korea. The situation desperate, with men and machines

freezing in the biting cold, the U.N. force was able to fight its way out of the encirclement and withdraw south, albeit with heavy casualties. By January 1951, U.N. forces would again be driven south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, leaving Seoul once again in the hands of the North Koreans and Chinese (Halbertam, 2007).

But once again the Chinese and North Korean offensive stalled because of poor logistics, exacerbated by the need to move men and material only at night due to U.N. air superiority by day. A series of U.N. counterattacks throughout winter and spring drove the communists north once again, recapturing Seoul and establishing a contiguous line just north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel by July 1951. There, the two massive armies dug in and faced off in much the same way the Allies and Central Powers had in Western Europe 35 years before, complete with a bomb-scarred “no man’s land” in between and the probing attacks that yielded little in the way of territory but much in the way of casualties, misery and destruction. Peace negotiations began, but each side continued to jockey for position, hoping to gain as much advantage as possible before the war ended in armistice two years later (Tucker et al, 2002).

In 1952, Sack plunged into this grim war of attrition. A newly minted, 22-year-old Harvard graduate with a taste for adventure, Sack volunteered for the U.S. Army and requested service in Korea. With the help of his journalism background, he landed a position with *Stars and Stripes* as a combat correspondent on the western front. He recounted his Army experiences in 1953’s *From Here to Shimbashi*. For Sack, serving as a war reporter not only helped satisfy his youthful lust for adventure, but proved a much more entertaining way to combat what he saw as the drudgery of Army life.

As long as I was going to be in the Army, God knows I couldn’t imagine anything else in the Army that could be any fun. If you’re going to be in the Army for two years, being a war correspondent offered a wonderful chance to be able to see a war and to leave it whenever you want. There was just really something exciting about the job, about waking

up at odd hours and driving the jeep north to Panmunjom, getting the stories, getting the scoops. I was twenty-two or twenty-three years old and really liked being outdoors, the adventure, the camaraderie with the other guys on *Stars and Stripes*. (Schroeder, 1992, p. 14)

### **Analysis**

But before Sack could embark on his adventure, induction at Fort Devens, Mass., and then 16 weeks of basic training at Fort Dix, N.J. awaited. Promptly nicknamed “Sad Sack” by his drill sergeant, Sack got the first inkling during his physical at Devens that the Army might not be the place for him. After first being assured by the doctor that he had some loathsome lung disease, Sack gently pointed out that it seemed suspicious that the four previous examinees *also* had the selfsame disease. Perhaps there were water spots on the x-ray film, Sack suggested. Impossible, said the doctor, you’ve got “emphysematous bullae as sure as I’m alive” (Sack, 1953, p. 15). Finally convincing the doctor the issue was worth looking into, Sack’s next x-ray revealed a clean bill of health. Nevertheless, the inflexibility evinced by the doctor became a recurring theme in Sack’s Army experiences.

While at Devens, Sack soon became aware that he was a member of the “lost platoon,” comprised of mostly reservists with which the Army did not know what to do. Generally, new recruits came and went in five days, but Sack’s lost platoon lingered in limbo for months. In fact, one man, eluding the eyes of Army bureaucracy for more than a year and a half, was discovered just in time to finally receive basic training – before being discharged (Sack, 1953). The men of the lost platoon did not rise at 5 a.m. like their fellow GIs, nor did they wait to go to chow at their assigned times. Indeed, with no oversight Sack and his compatriots often slept in until 7 and strolled to the mess hall whenever the mood struck. Only when the company’s sergeant major caught wind was the lost platoon discovered. “Goddamn it!” he roared. “You can’t do this! This ain’t no goddamn country club! This is the Army (Sack, 1953, p. 26)!”

Sack was constantly assaulted by what he felt to be the Army's rigid and irrational focus on meaningless ritual. Sack's company commander, a Captain Damisch, constantly exhorted his men that there were two things his company did not do: "We don't discriminate a fellow on the basis of race, creed or religion, and we don't leave gum in the urinals." Or: "We don't discriminate a fellow on the basis of race, creed or religion, and we don't sharpen pencils with bayonets" and so on (Sack, 1953, p.46). One lieutenant insisted that, failing all else, his men should never forget to carry pencils on their person, while still another constantly implored his men that if one barracks window were opened, then *all* should be. This is the same young officer who exhorted his men never to put their hands in their pockets because it was not "soldierly" – even while his were firmly stuffed into his own (Sack, 1953, p.49).

Indeed, Sack quickly came to believe that the Army was a shining example of bureaucratic ritualism taken to its most extreme. In another telling anecdote, the platoon's confrontation with drill instructor Corporal McHugh over the contents of the men's footlockers further illuminated Sack's disapproval of Army protocol. Citing the Army's manual on the Prescribed Array of Military Footlockers, McHugh insisted on absolute consistency from organization and content to what color tooth brushes the men could own. He even designated the brand of cigarettes the recruits were to use—even those who did not smoke.

'The cigarettes...that's gonna be Kools. 'But I don't smoke!' said Faletti. 'Damn it you don't gotta smoke 'em,' McHugh bawled, waving his plans in the air. 'All you gotta do is *have* 'em!' Damn it, all this stuff is in the book!' said McHugh. (Sack, 1953, p.53).

McHugh's dedication to "the book" also extended to oral hygiene. The manual, said McHugh, called for toothpowder only. Here, Sack sarcastically extrapolates the potential damage done by his preference—in direct opposition to *The Soldier's Handbook* – for paste over powder:

I was content that the war effort in Korea had been compromised to a greater or lesser degree by my thoughtless use of Pepsodent in its gummose form. I mean it – suppose that my toothpaste and I went 'over there' and the former froze over in the mountains of Frozen

Chosen. A cold cement, it wouldn't come out of its toothpaste tube, and I, its dirty-toothed owner, would be evacuated to some rear-area 'mash' with a case of gross carious lesions. My squad would be one man short, and as our slit-eyed enemies came up the mountain we—Listen! It wasn't impossible! (Sack, 1983, p. 114-115)

Still, Sack was also confronted with the reality of what awaited in Korea. While at Dix, Sack's platoon had several drill instructors, some staying no more than a few days before being shipped off to some other duty by Army bureaucrats. But none was more disconcerting than a corporal who had recently returned from combat duty in Korea.

The stories he told kept us in a constant state of neurosis. 'Back in Frozen Chosen,' he would say, 'we never usta sleep in sleepin' bags. We *usta* sleep in sleepin' bags, but da Chinks caught us in 'em and slit our throats.' Corporal Griffin was very frightening. We breathed easier when he was discharged. (Sack, 1953, p.45)

Sack arrived at the front just in time to witness first-hand the battle that seemed to epitomize the ultimate futility of the Korean stalemate—Old Baldy. So named because artillery and air bombardments had completely removed the last vestiges of plant and animal life from its crest, Hill 266, situated on the west-central frontlines, had nevertheless been deemed vitally important to both sides. The Chinese were bivouacked atop the hill in force, using it as an observation point from which to spy on U.N. positions for miles. U.S. commanders ordered the hill taken. Three bloody assaults were made in June and July 1952 before the Chinese were finally driven from the summit in early August (Tucker et al, 2002).

As for Sack, he was set to witness the battle from his own observation bunker opposite the hill, when he and his "hooch" mates received three very important guests. Gens. Taylor, Kendall and Trudeau—four, three and two-star generals respectively, each wanting to watch the battle for Baldy from Sack's hooch as well. Sack recounts the scene as still further evidence that the Army's slavish devotion to protocol was not only absurd, but unnecessarily cost the lives of countless GIs as well.

See, the army's etiquette is that every order is issued by a four-star general to a three-star general to – but whoops, the three-star general was a missing link in this daisy chain today. 'Uh, I'm not here to announce how to run this operation,' the four-star general said [to the two-star general]. "But if I were you, I suppose I'd pull everyone off of Baldy. I'd send in smoke today, send in some artillery today, really work it over tonight. And then attack tomorrow.' The three-star general...stood up and hobbled to the two-star general to reinstate himself in the Great Chain of Being. 'Now, *general*, the three-star said so threateningly that the two-star came to army-academy attention – 'the attack has failed, general! All you're doing is fooling around on Baldy! So call your people off Baldy! And pound it with artillery! And when you're ready, call me and we'll attack it!' A day later and a few dead soldiers more, the GIs were finally told to stop fooling around and to get themselves off of Old Baldy. To no one's astonishment, they did and as fast as cottontail rabbits too. (Sack, 1983, pp.146-155)

What rendered the situation all-the-more absurd, wrote Sack, was that in order to "pound Baldy with artillery," the Army must first have artillery *shells*, a commodity in very short supply at the time. Privates like he knew this, Sack ruefully points out, so why didn't the generals? Eventually, the Secretary of the Army got wind of the shortage, and flew to Korea to see firsthand. Upon visiting an ammo dump, the secretary asked an enlisted man whether there was enough ammunition.

'Yes sir,' the soldier said. Well Jesus! What is he supposed to say to the secretary and all the four-star generals in the Far East Command? No sirree, sir, the situation is all fucked up? A man is mad who exposes himself to forty lashes by telling the truth to his massa, and it was in self-defense that the soldier said, 'Yes sir. We have the normal number of artillery rounds.' (Sack, 1983, pp. 158-159)

Sack's time in Korea came to an end when he was nearly court-martialed for pursuing what he thought was his journalistic imperative. Despite an Army injunction forbidding correspondents from boarding prison ships, Sack stowed away overnight aboard a U.S. landing ship in order to interview Chinese prisoners of war on their way toward repatriation in the North (Sack, 1953). Various news organizations were on hand to catch a glimpse of the prisoners when the ship docked in Pusan the next day. Sack, to the chagrin of nearly everyone in the Far East Command—including commanding General Mark Clark—was the first man off the boat. As flashbulbs popped and correspondents scrambled to find out what was happening, Sack was

arrested by American military police and reassigned to a mailroom in Tokyo while the Army pondered his fate. A month later and unable to find specific charges to file against him, the Army ordered Sack back to Korea—this time as a frontline infantryman. Sack stalled and at the last minute found a position writing radio news for the Voice of the United Nations Command until his tour ended a few months later (Sack, 1953).

### **Conclusion**

Sack's narrative of his Army life during the Korean War seemed to be informed by a particular philosophical belief system. In Sack's view, efforts by institutions like the Army to impose the "One Best Way" on its recruits were born of the chimerical desire for total efficiency inherent in industrialized societies (Sack, 1983). Sack believed this represented a larger pattern within an overarching "System" whose driving aim was to build a perfect society by co-opting the individual and eliminating human imperfections (Sack, 1973). To Sack, institutions like the Army were just part of the larger effort undertaken by corporations, advertising, and the government to homogenize mankind. (Sack, 1973; Sack, 1983). According to Sack, the System believed the only impediment to this "utopian" ideal was the essence of life itself:

A practical fact of America was that living things were in the way almost everywhere and America knew it. The *raison d'être* of a superstate, after all, was the abolition of all uncertainty, which, alas, was a gas that escaped out of living things as regularly as Co<sub>2</sub>. Open, uncontrollable, obedient just to its own imperatives – like a runaway horse, life had a way of slipping the reins and of running wild, of upsetting the absolutes and of overloading the equations with x's. They built us a world that we could control to its outermost inch and its innermost ounce. Or *could* if we still didn't endure the vestigial presence of Man and of the blots his personal determination introduced into the perfect design. (Sack, 1973, p. 157-158)

Consequently, a dominant frame emerges from Sack's early work: "**Absurd Army Bureaucracy.**" Sack chooses to emphasize the stubbornness and inflexibility of the commissioned and noncommissioned officers which populate his narrative. They are portrayed as irrationally clinging to the "One Best Way," no matter how absurd or ineffectual it may be.

This is evidenced by the inflexible doctor and his x-rays, Captain Damisch's disproportional interest that his men not leave gum in the urinals or sharpen pencils with bayonets, *The Soldier's Handbook* edict of toothpowder over paste and Kools for cigarettes, and so on. Of course, this phenomenon was not limited to lower ranked commanders but included generals as well. Recall the generals at Old Baldy, so concerned with chain-of-command etiquette while GIs fought and died just yards away. Or the Army Secretary, so credulous that there was no ammunition shortage because, in his perfect system, simply no other outcome was *possible*.

## CHAPTER 4 M

### **Background**

Following the victory of the Vietminh communists over French colonial forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the Geneva Accords officially divided the Southeast Asian country of Vietnam into two separate nations at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. The victory came after a long and ultimately fruitless effort by France to reassert control over its erstwhile colony following World War II. Initially, the split was intended to be temporary, pending elections in 1956 to determine if and how the two countries could be reunified (Karnow, 1983).

However, much like the Korean War which had ended just the year before, both the United States and Soviet Union saw their national interests involved in the outcome of the Vietnam question. The United States supported President Ngo Dinh Diem in the South, while the Soviets backed Vietminh leader Ho Chi Minh in the North. Both Diem and the United States, which had by then stepped in to fill the vacuum left in the wake of the French departure, feared that elections would ensure that a more populous North would result in a reunification under communist rule (Herring, 1979).

By 1959, Ho became convinced that the elections would never happen. With the backing of his Soviet and Chinese patrons, the communist leader stepped up the North's infiltration of men, material and political support to its National Liberation Front (commonly known as the Vietcong) clients in the South. On the other side were Diem and the growing U.S. commitment of military aid and advisers, set to prop up the autocratic leader and stave off a communist victory in Southeast Asia (Sheehan, 1988).

The Vietcong's black-pajama-clad insurgents, often indistinguishable from the mostly rural peasants from whom their numbers were drawn, continued to carry out an ever-escalating

guerilla war in the South, regularly defeating the reluctant and often corrupt South Vietnamese government forces, despite the ever-increasing U.S. aid and military advisers. Indeed, South Vietnamese leaders, from Diem down to field commanders, did not believe in the aggressive pursuit of the feared Vietcong, preferring instead to remain on the defensive. Diem's recalcitrance, along with his brutal and unpopular suppression of various armed Buddhist militias, led to his murder during a U.S.-approved coup in November 1963. Subsequent South Vietnamese presidents, however, fared even worse than Diem in their conflict with the Vietcong, prompting the United States to directly introduce ground troops in March 1965 (Sheehan, 1988; Karnow, 1983).

While U.S. involvement in Vietnam could be traced back to its support of the anti-Japanese Vietminh of World War II, its commitment had until now involved little more than financial aid and military advisers. For most Americans, the conflict was a small and distant "brushfire" war barely registering on the periphery of consciousness. That all changed by the end of 1965, as more than 180,000 U.S. military personnel had by then arrived in Vietnam, and casualties had begun to quickly mount. Nearly 1,400 men had already been killed and more than 5,300 wounded in combat operations against the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army regulars. In addition, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's ill-conceived Rolling Thunder bombing campaign had by then been initiated, with 171 U.S. aircraft shot down and direct operational costs running at \$460 million. Back home, not even the most optimistic government and journalistic reports could keep such grim numbers from the people, as street protests and violent clashes with police escalated. And in perhaps the most disturbing example of anti-war protest to date, Quaker Norman Morrison, 31, immolated himself 40 feet from the window of McNamara's

Pentagon office, nearly incinerating his infant daughter in the process (Hering, 1979; Bowman, 1985; Karnow, 1983).

For John Sack, then CBS News bureau chief in Madrid, the escalating conflict in Vietnam had barely registered on his radar as well. Then he saw a *Time* magazine article that, to Sack, misrepresented what it meant to be in combat, something he had experienced firsthand during the Korean War.

*Time* was gung-ho about the war; it wrote of some soldiers jumping out of a helicopter and described them as “lean, mean and looking for a fight.” At that point I rebelled immediately. I’d been in Korea and I’d never seen a soldier who was lean, mean and looking for a fight. Scared shitless was more like it. But all the reportage about the war in Vietnam was written in that same gung-ho World War II style, and I knew that’s not the way the Army was. The first images that came to me were...people grouching, goldbricking, getting the wrong bullets in the rifles, shooting each other – everybody screwing up. (Schroeder, 1992, p.16)

Sack decided to do a story that represented what he believed to be the true nature of men in conflict. The first step would be to first establish them as human beings, not the iron-jawed icons of Hollywood legend that seemed to inspire coverage like that in *Time* and other news outlets. Next, he would chronicle their evolution from wide-eyed recruits to combat veterans, giving readers an unflinching look into the human face of war. He settled on following an infantry company through basic training and into its first combat duty in Vietnam (Polsgrove, 1995).

But what medium would he use? His position at CBS guaranteed decent funding and a television crew, but would his bosses allow him the kind of time it would take to truly absorb the story? Sack knew that time is money in the television game, and that the higher ups would expect results—quickly. No, Sack reasoned, if were going to do the story right, he would have to put on his writer’s hat once again. He pitched the idea to *Esquire* magazine, at the time one of the leading lights of American literary journalism. Sack knew that writing for such a magazine would ensure that he had the time, financial backing and, perhaps most importantly, the freedom

from constraints like daily filings and objectivity that he believed hampered traditional journalism in its endeavor to report the truth about war (Polsgrove, 1995).

Sack settled on his old stomping grounds of Fort Dix, N.J. as the place to provide his infantry company, M. Remembering the diverse characters that populated the Army base in his youth, Sack knew that the recruits at Dix would be an authentic representation of the socio-economic and racial makeup of the country. In short, he wanted his unit to be comprised of “everymen” with which readers could readily sympathize and identify. To reinforce the anonymity, the premise that the company’s soldiers could be any young man living next door, Sack chose not to include its parent units. It would simply be known as “M” (Schroeder, 1992).

### **Analysis**

*M* provides a “grunt’s eye” view of what it meant to be an American soldier preparing for war in the early days of Vietnam, from basic training to actual combat. Sack describes in great detail barracks life, the backgrounds of select characters, and their interactions with each other and the noncommissioned and commissioned officers who commanded them. Likewise, Sack places the reader at the heart of the anxiety, uncertainty and outright fear as M arrives for its first duty in Vietnam.

The narrative opens with M preparing for an inspection by its captain, a scene known all too well by Sack, himself a veteran of countless Army inspections during his Korean War service. And again, much like Sack’s own Corporal McHugh, we see M’s sergeant exhorting his men to follow the chart within the *Soldier’s Manual* as if it were the word of God. Again, Sack displays his disdain for the Army’s devotion to what he believed to be meaningless ritual:

It bore the enacting signature of the Army’s adjutant general, none other. The insides of a guy’s footlocker (the general had commanded) should be like so; and what a proud inspection they’d have if M would just faithfully comply! The general had ordered that Pepsodent, or whatever the boy enjoyed must go to the rear of the footlocker, left, it mustn’t be dirty or dusty, and it must be bottom backwards so the words TOOTH

POWDER go to the right, while his razor, his blade, his toothbrush, and his comb all covered down on his soap dish; and everything must lie on his whitest towel, the general declared. (Sack, 1967, p.1)

And this devotion went well beyond the company sergeant's inspection. Sack illustrates another scene in which the battalion commander enumerates his expectations for his men:

'The first thing is the brass,' meaning the little yellow U.S. buttons, 'I want'em five-eighths of an inch,' meaning from the collar's edge, 'I'm really tight on that. Then – the necktie,' simulating on his blue infantry scarf, 'it should be up real tight. Then going down. The rifleman's medal – is it centered? The pocket buttons....' His name was Major Small. A good officer, a veteran of Vietnam, well liked by his soldiers, his tragedy was to be at that uncertain stage in his Army career when...he had nothing to do. His rank afforded him such narrow creative outlets as recommending that the urinal tubes be marked URINAL TUBES and noting, after his last visit to the practice field, that a sergeant was sucking on a toothpick (Sack, 1967, pp. 5-6)

We are also introduced to Private Demirgian, an Armenian-American who seemed to epitomize Sack's image of the reluctant civilian soldier forced to serve in America's military. Much like Joseph Heller's "Yossarian" in the novel, *Catch-22*, Demirgian was seen by Sack as the modern-day, cynical embodiment of the conscripted American. Indeed, as M prepares for its inspection, we see Demirgian half-heartedly trying to convince a fellow soldier to break his jaw in order to receive a medical discharge.

Demirgian alone conspired with himself to get discharged; out, a consummation he tried to effect by exercising his will-o-the-wisp power. Demirgian built castles in Spain, Armenian, in any area M wasn't – he dared to have madly escapist flights of imagination because his intuition secretly assured him that they'd come to naught. 'I'm waiting. I'm waiting,' Demirgian said while in some buried subconscious are he may have thought, *my friends better rescue me* – which seconds later they did. (Sack, 1967, p. 1)

But Demirgian was not the only trooper in Sack's narrative who was less than enthusiastic about his time in the Army. Indeed, most are portrayed as goldbricks always on the lookout for ways in which to avoid responsibility. Those few who do seem enthusiastic about serving are framed as being somehow defective from the rest. Consider the following excerpt in which M is supposed to be receiving combat training from Sergeant Foley:

Seated on a cold classroom bench, one of Foley's pupils hung on his every diabolical word: Russo his name was. Small and round and wild-eyed, the Quixotic victim of too many late-late shows on television, Russo suddenly lied and joined the Army when he was sixteen, and he sat whispering heroic things like 'Aargh!' as Foley spoke. But behind Foley two soldiers played tic-tac-toe and a third whispered, 'I got winners.' Demirgian's friend Sullivan toyed with his rifle-repair tool, musing, *this could be a deadly weapon. Crack-k-k! Put someone's eye out.* Standing not sitting, Prochaska tried not to fall asleep after a night of walking in circles in a military manner, mounting guard, and another boy from guard duty now slowly sensed that rifle-repair tool was jabbing him in the ribs as Sullivan told him, 'Wake up,' Sullivan had had guard duty too. Demirgian – guard duty too – leaned over his spiral notebook drawing a long zigzag line, his ball-point pen never leaving the paper: a style of he had arrived at twelve. First he drew a caret mark, and bridging it he drew another beneath it, until his small stack of carets began to resolve themselves into sergeant's chevrons...Demirgian wrote on the sleeve where the service stripes go, the word DUMB. (Sack, 1967, pp. 8-9)

But as Sack explains, it is not necessarily serving in the Army that most members of M object to, but rather their superior's relentless focus on seemingly meaningless details. "Like most of M, Demirgian would ardently rather be in Vietnam than be sitting listening to sergeants talking about it, inspecting his footlocker, telling him to pick up matches and clean his boots – anyplace was better than M" (Sack, 1967, p.9).

According to Sack, it would not be until the men had actually reached Vietnam that the Army would provide them with a sergeant who would finally focus on their fundamental need: staying alive. "From a red-faced master sergeant...M had heard an extraordinary talk: for in two cluttered months of basic training, two of infantry training, no other sergeant had addressed himself to this vital matter—how to avoid dying" (Sack, 1967, p.14).

It would soon come in handy, for M had been attached to a battalion considered by many to be jinxed since it seemed to encounter Vietcong wherever it went. Of course, exhorted battalion commander Colonel Smoke, that is what they were in Vietnam to do:

'Now, I *know* you've heard about us. You heard we go killed and wounded, *didn't* you? But you also heard this, didn't you? That we killed a lot of VC! And there's no battalion in Vietnam that has *killed* as many VC as we have! And this is our job in Vietnam, we're here to *kill* the VC!' M listened silently, none of its faces revealing whether the colonel's words had reassured it. (Sack, 1967, p.19)

M's battalion was to be flown by helicopter in a few days into a Michelin rubber plantation up country. That destination was the source of great consternation among the troopers of M, though, because just about everybody in Vietnam seemed to know that was exactly where the battalion was destined. The situation seemed ripe for an ambush. But none was waiting as M set down nowhere near the rubber plantation. The whole thing had been a clever ruse of intentional disinformation. As M descended upon the local villages, Sack described the befuddlement often inherent in combat chain of command:

Morton was burning down Vietnamese houses, having been asked to. 'Stop burning those houses,' [Colonel] Smoke cried to his captains. 'There's no VC in those houses!' The captains told their lieutenants, don't burn those houses if there's no VC in them – the lieutenants told their sergeants, if you burn those houses there better be VC in them – the sergeants told their men, better go burn those houses because there's VC in them, and Morton kept striking his C-ration matches. Soon, there wasn't a Vietnamese farmhouse that wasn't just a layer of smoldering black dust. (Sack, 1967, p. 23)

For his part, Demirgian, about a half mile away, lazed by the side of the road reading an issue of *Stars and Stripes*, once again frustrated by the lack of action. To him, the only difference between the Army's "Grand Operation" today and the boring training exercises back in wintry New Jersey was the lack of snow. That changed the next day when he too had a chance to burn down a Vietnamese village.

Once when their APC's passed by some yellow Vietnamese houses where a sniper or two mightn't inconceivably lurk, the prudent cavalry men paused and burned the pathetic little hamlet down. Demirgian joined in with gusto, throwing his hand grenades into the thatch. Far from seeing this as senseless, Demirgian's inevitable GI point of view was, *finally!* Finally he could do something with a clear bearing on America's war effort, clear in a physical sense if hazy around the edges in the sense of grand strategy. (Sack, 1967, p.25)

In another scene, Sack describes Demirgian's impotence when his platoon, finally making contact with its elusive enemy, is taken by surprise in an ambush by a Vietcong rifle company. Unable to see or shoot his enemy, Demirgian is forced to find an outlet for his frustration and anger, as his fellow troopers fell dead and wounded around him.

When silver airplanes started to dive-bomb the trees, Demirgian could only lie behind his dike observing a colony of black termites eating a gray beetle. Taking his insect repellent from his pants pocket, Demirgian directed a fine needle spray at one of those conspicuous enemies of man, a termite who stopped in the midst of its verminous meal to look at Demirgian bug-eyed. Its shower bath continuing, the termite turned and fled to Demirgian's right, oblivious of the super saber jets that now dove in from there to drop their bombs with a spherical *boom* on the terrified evergreen trees. By now Charlie's spooky rifle company had spirited itself away, the first mellow *boom* of the dive bombers apparently being the cock's crow. (Sack, 1967, p.26)

And in still another scene, Sack illustrates the futility—indeed, absurdity—in finding and destroying the food stores of the enemy, in divining what rice was Vietcong and what was friendly.

William's company and Morton's company walked through the dark jungle of Sherwood forest, slow going, all sorts of tangly things, little red ants, their mission being to destroy Charlie's source of strength: the communist stores of rice. Every time Williams' snail-paced friends came to one in the underbrush they burned it – two or three tons of this brown, river-like stuff could keep Charlie's battalion marching on its stomach a week, the idea being. A gay little Vietnamese soldier was along to sanction any or all burnings and blowings up, first having satisfied himself that the rice in each cache was truly communist, the soldier having been trained in this mystic art. Once as their machetes cut through the vegetation, Williams' slow-gaited friends came to a stock of Vermont-like maple candy in laundry-soap sized bars. But being in a cave it just wouldn't burn. An inventive sergeant began to throw the sugary stuff to the ants – but no, too time-consuming. Hand grenades? Now he had maple sugar with holes. Nausea-inducing gas? Nothing doing, it might be against the Geneva convention. At last the patient sergeant radioed the Army engineers, who blew up the maple candy with TNT. Bigalow was on his safari in his flack capacity, *a story!* he told himself, but he guessed that he couldn't write it, a public-information sergeant having told him no such predatory doings would pass Army censorship. 'You're not going to win friends among the Vietnamese farmers,' Bigalow's sergeant had explained. (Sack, 1967, pp.26-27)

Still, the Vietcong remained maddeningly elusive. But in the following scene, Sack describes the reaction of an M trooper who, after days on the operation, finally comes face to face with a live Vietcong soldier.

And such was Williams' nonbelligerent temper when he had that sudden brush with his Communist, a Vietnamese with a white shirt and *hair – black hair*, Williams would never forget his bushy hair. Resting in a little jungle hole, a gully, hearing a twig crack, turning around, Williams saw this black-haired intruder and shouted, '*Ho*,' ducking instinctively into his hole. A bullet burned across his shoulder blade and Williams cried out, '*Oh*,' burying his startled face in the dirt, holding his black rifle high above him like an African's

spear, shooting it at the trees one-handed, *bang! bang! bang!* and crying, ‘*Sergeant! sergeant! sergeant! come here!*’ My kingdom for a periscope! (Sack, 1967, p.27)

But the ultimate frustration and futility of M’s first combat mission would come to grim climax when the troopers accidentally slew a little Vietnamese girl—the only person, friend or foe, which the company would kill during the operation.

Friday the long awaited happened – M’s battalion killed somebody, at last. The episode was again the doing of Demirgian’s platoon, again it had climbed on those hot APC’s and had driven *bump – bounce – bump* to Sherwood forest and beyond, burning more yellow houses as it went. Then it was that the incident happened. A cavalryman, seeing a sort of bunker place, a hut above, hole below, and hearing some voices inside it, told Demirgian to throw a grenade in. Demirgian hesitating – a soldier we have met before, though not by name, jumped from his APC and flipped in a hand grenade himself...gaspd as ten or a dozen women and children came shrieking out in their crinkled pajamas. A Negro specialist-four, his black rifle in his hands, warily extended his head in, peering through the darkness one or two seconds before he cried, “Oh my God, they hit a little girl,” and in his muscular black arms carried out a seven-year-old, long black hair and little earrings, staring eyes – eyes, her eyes are what froze themselves onto M’s memory, it seemed there was no white to those eyes, nothing but black ellipses like black goldfish. The child’s nose was bleeding – there was a hole in the back of her skull. (Sack, 1967, pp. 29-30)

### Conclusion

Several frames are apparent in Sack’s narrative. Again, the “**Absurd Army Bureaucracy**” frame is present, Sack’s take on the Army’s mechanical dedication to meaningless detail and ritual, and reiteration of his belief that such institutions seek to impose the “One Best Way” on humanity in the vain search for total efficiency, crushing all those who do not comply. Noncommissioned and commissioned officers alike are generally portrayed as single-minded and inflexible in their pursuit of homogeneity within the ranks. Indeed, as Sack writes elsewhere, “Vietnam was another front in the Armageddon of the machine against man, and its most infamous atrocities was a small exaggeration of what happens every day in the mill wheels of Main street. As one philosopher said of our thing in Vietnam, ‘Who did it? Our whole way of life did it’” (Sack, 1973, p.vii).

Another frame which emerges is the “**Reluctant/Incompetent American Soldier.**” Generally, the soldiers of Sack’s narrative are portrayed as lazy, unenthusiastic and not particularly bright. Those few who are featured as enthusiastic about serving in combat, are portrayed as somehow defective or as deviating from the norm established by Sack’s narrative, as exemplified by the portrayal of Demirgian, Russo and Colonel Smoke.

A third frame can be described as the “**Invincible Enemy,**” whereas the Vietcong are portrayed as ghost-like in their elusiveness, always knowing exactly when and where to attack, with little danger to themselves. Conversely, American GIs are portrayed as fearful and impotent in the face of such an enemy, as exemplified by the portrayal of soldiers like Williams.

Yet another frame advanced by Sack is that of “**Vietnamese as Victims.**” Rural Vietnamese are shown as largely innocent, passive victims American brutality, as evidenced by the burnt villages and the dead little girl.

And lastly, *M* can be said to advance a master frame comprised of those frames above. This master frame can be described as the “**Futility of the Vietnam War,**” within which Army leaders are portrayed as incompetent, American soldiers are reluctant and often cowardly, the enemy is too tough and knowledgeable to defeat, and Vietnamese civilians suffer needlessly. Indeed, published first as an *Esquire* piece in 1966 and a year later as a book, *M* was dubbed by *New York Times* writer Neil Sheehan as “probably the first truly anti-war novel to emerge from the Vietnam conflict” (Sheehan, 1967, p.BR2).

CHAPTER 5  
WHEN DEMIRGIAN COMES MARCHING HOME AGAIN (HURRAH? HURRAH?)

**Background**

Sack returned to New York and spent the rest of the summer getting the manuscript for *M* into shape for its October publication in *Esquire*. His editors threw him a triumphant welcome home party. News came that his agent, Candida Donadio, had sold a book version of *M* to the New American Library. He quickly became a celebrated guest at many of Manhattan's finest cocktail parties, hosts and onlookers eager for stories about his adventures in Vietnam. Indeed, Sack was enjoying his newfound celebrity as summer in New York turned to fall. But something began to tug at his conscience: Here he was relishing the good life while the troopers of M were still in the field in Vietnam. So he convinced *Esquire* editor Harold Hayes to send him back to chronicle M's final battle before rotating home (Polsgrove, 1995).

But by the time Sack made it back to Vietnam in late fall 1966, company M was being kept mostly out of combat operations as its one-year tour neared its end. Undaunted, Sack went back and interviewed troopers like Demirgian and others, reconstructing the events of their last few months in combat. Far from the wide-eyed, green recruits he had grown accustomed to during his first stay with the company, Sack discovered that some of M's troopers had been transformed into hate-filled machines, especially Demirgian, whose overriding desire had become to finally kill a communist before his tour ended. But it was not just communists that Demirgian and others hated—it was now all Vietnamese, the people their government had supposedly sent them to help. “When Demirgian Comes Marching Home Again (Hurrah? Hurrah?),” first published in the January 1968 edition of *Esquire*, is Sack's take on what he found upon returning to Vietnam (Polsgrove, 1995; Sack, 1968).

## Analysis

In the opening scene we see that Demirgian can think of little else than finally killing a communist, those who his government had sent him to kill.

Demirgian's dream, Demirgian's *raison d'être* was to kill himself one. He could see it: *Charlie tries to creep up on me, Demirgian mused, Charlie tries that and I'll lie here – yeah, I'll let him get ten meters from me. Yeah, and I'll have a hand grenade and I'll pull the pin – Charlie, you've had it! And kkk, and I'll the handle go and I'll one—! Two—! and I'll throw it!* A year in Vietnam, a year minus eighty-eight days and Demirgian had still never killed, wounded, scratched, or stuck out a tongue at – still never seen a VC to have himself at. Good luck, Demirgian. (Sack, 1968, pp. 3-4).

Yes, Demirgian harbors an overriding desire to kill a communist, and within this desire lies a “secret” motivation which Sack reveals at the end of the story. But to be sure, Demirgian's impetus is not driven by any longing for an Army medal upon his chest. Indeed, as Sack points out, military decorations in Vietnam are nothing special.

Day after day, for every fifteen hundred men in Vietnam who didn't kill a VC, statistically there was one who did. And typically got a medal for it, a starred or a striped ribbon, and a citation ending with, 'His actions are in the highest traditions of the military service.' This, a PFC at Demirgian's headquarters sat up each night to ten-thirty writing. An alumnus of Rutgers, it had occurred to him that shooting a VC was only traditional if a GI approached it with certain *élan*. Accordingly, he had written things like *relentless efforts, tenacious adherence, indomitable resolution, and unwavering determination* on a stenographer's pad, to use like tinker toys to make those citations out. It didn't matter: let a GI kill every communist in China or one dumb machine gunner, he didn't get a medal of honor without a citation saying that he had never relented from his determined effort to destroy the enemy and to assist his fallen comrades, unquote. (Sack, 1968, pp. 9-10)

Many of Demirgian's fellow GIs, those who were far less enthusiastic in their drive to kill, wondered at the trooper, trying to guess his secret motivation.

*Now what's with Demirgian?* the boy used to ask himself, a GI is taught to fire at the communist areas, pick up the brass, give me a piece of your fruitcake, thanks – a job is a job, don't have to get ferocious about it. But Demirgian! What was Demirgian after, get a holiday at the China sea? Get a medal for killing a communist? Get a souvenir: a Russian watch or some raggedy wet piasters to buy orange pop at the Coke stand with? Often, the boy had wondered what was Demirgian bugged by, never, though, had he guessed at Demirgian's secret. (Sack, 1968, p.17)

In another scene, Demirgian's sergeant ponders the same question:

Demirgian's mysterious vendetta wasn't – well, it wasn't a vendetta, the sergeant knew. Not a boy in Demirgian's whole platoon had been killed by the communists since the first days of Demirgian's tour. Accidents happen, but Demirgian couldn't fault the communists for 'I didn't know it was loaded' behavior, this sergeant appreciated. One of Demirgian's late-lamented friends had been scratching his head with a .45 when he idiotically pulled the trigger, another who didn't have a 'church key' to open a Crush had tried unintelligently with a 50-caliber bullet, another had used gasoline to burn up what's underneath latrines and oh! Was burned to death like a Buddhist, it wasn't the Bolsheviks this. Seven whole boys (a lieutenant even) had shot themselves in this or that anatomical organ in one embarrassing week, the fault was their own and Demirgian wasn't out for revenge. (Sack, 1968, p.22)

But alas, Demirgian had still spent the last year hiding in the bush with his secret, waiting through the agonizingly boring night ambushes in the vain hope that a communist would happen by. Sack uses Demirgian's unused bullets to illustrate that, not only did America's industrial might place Demirgian in Vietnam, but its people as well. All Americans, from the president down to lowliest factory worker, were part of the "machine."

Inside of Demirgian's rifle was a full hundred thousand millionth of one percent of the year's gross nation product. A bullet, it had been mined in Colorado, roasted, smelted, refined, and transported to Connecticut. And a thousand wheels went around and around! Every day, Demirgian put an American bullet into his mean-looking rifle. A power uncalled upon... a bullet was an unessential item in a war where the enemy's AWOL. Americans by the millions had willingly given up life, liberty, and the pursuit of everything else to put that bullet into Demirgian's barrel. In fact, every bloomin' soul in Demirgian's acquaintance was a wheel in that green machine, the Army. (Sack, 1968, pp. 6-7)

But as Sack writes, although the entire "machine" is set for victory in Vietnam, one major inconvenience stands in its the way: the Vietnamese themselves. To the GIs, the people whom they were supposedly sent to help could not care less about helping them.

The Vietnamese were the broken link and it was their fault that the green machine didn't go. If those people were to get with it, Demirgian just could ambush, ambush, and ambush – imagine, a radio telephone rings and... 'My name is Ho,' a rice farmer says.' I live in the house with the light on – I hear VC outside.' *Be right there*, Demirgian tells him. If only the Vietnamese fitted in, Demirgian's bullets, Demirgian's bombs...Demirgian's wonderful weapons would work. He could just order the Vietnamese people, 'Attention.' And dress right dress, and forward march out to ten

million rubber rafts. And then three! two! one! In one immense mushroom cloud, the war would be totally over. If those people fitted in, Demirgian now would be home again, uninjured, undead. It wasn't especially likely. Give a good rubber raft to a Vietnamese and he would sell it for shower shoes for Americans (*Or for the VC*, Demirgian thought). (Sack, 1968, pp. 7-8)

Indeed, it was not just the Vietnamese's seeming refusal to help them combat the Vietcong that so rankled the GIs. Many, including Demirgian, believed the Vietnamese to be little more than money grubbers, profiteering from the war and the suffering of American troops. In the following scene, Sack describes a confrontation between Demirgian and a Vietnamese woman who had set up a soda stand outside the company base camp.

Money, money, that's what the Coke crowd cared about, the GIs believed. Once, Demirgian had bought himself orange pop, he had paid out a fifty-piaster bill, the lady had pushed it into her dress, and Demirgian had said politely, 'Change?' At that, the lady had started to shriek: to *shriek* in the half-hysterical *ow*'s of a dog when there's someone on its tail, to shriek at Demirgian and the echoing acres that fifty piasters – fifty cents – was a fair market price for a bottle of pop in Asia. It was morning, and Demirgian was used to the silence of the ambush that he had been lying on all that night to enable the shrieking lady to engage in free enterprise. It rankled that he had risked life and limb for a race of such ingrates as to challenge, in shrieks, even his right to renew himself with a bottle of soda without paying them ten times the wholesale price. (Sack, 1968, p.12)

Indeed, to Demirgian and other GIs, the Vietnamese were a hopeless impediment to the efficiency of the "machine's" mission in Vietnam.

It just exasperated everyone. A wooden shoe in the wheelworks: that's what the Vietnamese were, the wrench in the war machine, the hitch, the fatal insertion of human uncertainty in the System. *These people*, the GIs just could do zero about them. A mission impossible was to reform them, to rid those people of errors, inefficiencies, improprieties, impurities – *dirt*, to jut clean them up. *Vietnamese*, if they would work for America, if they would talk in English, if they would telephone us or set lanterns out, *The commies are coming*, one if by land, two if by sampan, if they would simply adjust to a Great Society in Asia. If they would adapt to corps, corporations, to going to work every morning with a tan attaché case – (Sack, 1968, p.13-14)

Ironically, Demirgian misses his best opportunity to date to kill a communist when he falls asleep on ambush, even as a Vietcong squad passes by on its way to attack, along with the rest of its battalion, Demirgian's company base camp. More ironic still is that fact that, had Demirgian

been awake and opened fire, his now cutoff squad would have been eliminated. Instead,

Demirgian dreams about a meeting he had once had with a fellow GI while on leave in Bangkok.

‘What’s new?’ Well, in Vietnam it had been another week, the GI said – Demirgian’s friend, Demirgian’s buddy, had been accidentally shot by the squad sergeant and, well, the platoon sergeant had been killed by Army artillery, idiotically one of our cannon shells fell on his sleeping bag, it was hi-dee-hee in the field artillery and, of course, the first sergeant, he had been saying police up this, police up that, exactly as some clumsy son-of-a-dumbbell stepped on a detonator and as *‘police up’* died on the first sergeant’s lips the first sergeant died and oh, yes, another company, unintentionally it had been napalmed, twenty or thirty soldiers were in the hospital, another twenty or thirty dead, and – so it had been a ridiculous week. (Sack, 1968, p.28)

It was only the next morning that Demirgian would finally get his chance. The base camp had survived the night attack, and scores of Vietcong dead now littered the ground outside its perimeter. Returning from another fruitless ambush, Demirgian once again gave into his frustration, kicking at the lifeless bodies strewn about. All lifeless except:

One of the communist soldiers woke up! He looked at Demirgian slowly through one of his eyes, an eye like a twist of lemon rind, an oily eye! A living breathing communist, a boy of about eighteen, a Vietnamese in black, Demirgian brought down his foot on his face and *crunch*, Demirgian felt his little nose go like a macaroon, he said to the communist, “Bastard – well, was it worth it,” kicking him in his eyeballs. “Stupid bastard – what did it get you,” kicking him on his Adam’s apple. “Goddam bastard, stupid bastard, dumb bastard, thought you were better than us Americans, didn’t you? Ignorant bastard,” Demirgian said and he kicked at that black bag of bones until it had given a consummation to Demirgian’s tour of duty and a high success to Demirgian’s quest by quietly becoming dead. (Sack, 1968, p.31-32)

Demirgian had finally killed his communist, and it is only then that Sack allows us to know Demirgian’s “secret.”

Demirgian wants to kill commies because they are Vietnamese, that’s it. A year here, Demirgian thought, and I just stand around with a finger up. And whose fault is it? Theirs – the Vietnamese people’s. A cow, a tree, a rock on the railroad tracks – the people are in my goddam way, I hate them! Dead or alive – crippled, I could be blind, a basket case and they wouldn’t help me! Faces the color of prunes, teeth the color of coffee grounds, mouths just like a Disposall – the breath of a garbage bag, I bet, I expect to see ants crawling out! A million, two million, I wish I were told to kill eighteen million! And then we would win this war. (Sack, 1968, p.32)

## Conclusion

Several frames are apparent within Sack's text. Again, we see a continuation and intensification of the "**Reluctant/Incompetent American Soldier**" frame first established by Sack in *M*. Sack uses only examples of American GIs who have either killed or wounded themselves or their fellow soldiers, rendering a morbid "Keystone Cops" quality to American efforts in the field. Conversely, soldiers who display enthusiasm for killing the enemy, in this case Demirgian, are portrayed as somehow dysfunctional, while less enthusiastic GIs like those who question Demirgian's motivations are portrayed as being within the norm. A "**Medals for Nothing**" sub-frame seems to support the larger frame, as well. Here, Sack portrays military decorations in Vietnam as being cheaply won and exaggerated in their praise of soldiers.

We also see a continuation and transmogrification of the "**One Best Way**" frame into what can be described as, to use Sack's selfsame titled 1973 book, "**The Man-Eating Machine.**" The machine's grinding bureaucracy seeks to impose homogeneity on mankind by eliminating individualism, imperfection and inefficiency, destroying all and anything in its way. From this, we see the emergence of two new related frames.

The first can be described as "**America's Collective Guilt,**" where the responsibility for what happens in Vietnam is shared not only by the nation's leaders and military, but by the American people—in whose interest the military acts—as well. This is evidenced by Sack's attention to the fabrication of Demirgian's bullets—and all who contribute and profit from it.

The second frame can be described as "**Vietnamese as Impediment,**" where, by virtue of their recalcitrance toward the will of the machine, they themselves are the greatest obstacle to their own freedom and prosperity—and to America's war effort. The Vietnamese are portrayed as alien in their habits, unhelpful in combating the Vietcong, and as callously profiting off the war and the American soldiers sacrificing so much to fight it.

Finally, a master frame comprising those above seems evident, as well: “**The Corrupting Effects of the Vietnam War.**” Not only is the machine destroying Vietnam and its people, but the nature of war is transforming them into crass profiteers, as well. Likewise, the war has a corrosive effect on America’s soldiers, instilling within some—like Demirgian—a violent and maniacal hatred. Finally, the American people are diminished by the war, as well. They, after all, are just as much a part of Sack’s machine—and just as responsible—as the civilian and military leaders waging the war.

## CHAPTER 6 LIEUTENANT CALLEY

### **Background**

On the morning of March 16, 1968, elements of Charlie company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division (also known as the Americal Division) entered the village of My Lai 4 in the central-coastal province of Quang Ngai in search of the Vietcong's 48<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion, thought to be hiding in and around the hamlet. For years, Quang Ngai had been considered by U.S. commanders to be a hotbed of Vietcong activity and sympathizers. Indeed, the province had by 1966 been declared a "free-fire zone," in which U.S. forces were free to bombard by air and artillery without the approval of Saigon or other provincial officials. By spring 1967, about 70 percent of province dwellings had been destroyed, leaving some 138,000 civilians homeless as a result of ongoing U.S. operations. U.S. forces also claimed some 3,300 Vietcong killed, 5,000 suspects arrested, and about 800 weapons seized. However, because the Vietcong wore no uniforms and blended easily with the civilian population, determining friend from foe in Quang Ngai, as with virtually all other areas of South Vietnam, was often a maddening dilemma for U.S. forces (Hersh, 1970, p.5).

In addition, earlier that winter Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army regulars had launched what would come to be known as the Tet Offensive, a massive surprise attack conducted despite the announced ceasefire in honor of the Vietnamese lunar new year. The offensive included attacks on South Vietnam's seven largest cities, most of its provincial capitals, and the penetration of the U.S. embassy in Saigon by Vietcong sappers. Despite initial setbacks, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had been largely successful routing Vietcong forces by March. The elusive 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion, however, had so far avoided being trapped. Charlie Company was charged with finding and destroying any elements of the 48<sup>th</sup> within My Lai 4,

while the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's remaining two companies would take up blocking positions to prevent the Vietcong's escape (Hersh, 1970).

The night before the attack, Charlie Company commander Captain Ernest Medina coordinated battle plans with his men. The company, comprised of three platoons, would sweep into My Lai 4, with Lt. William Calley's 1<sup>st</sup> platoon leading the way. Accounts vary as to Medina's orders regarding treatment of civilians, however. Some, including Calley, recall that Medina ordered that every living thing within My Lai 4 should be killed, including women, children, even livestock. Medina, however, insists his order was to simply destroy the village and poison the water wells. "The idea was to destroy the village so the 48<sup>th</sup> VC would be forced to move," Medina would later say (Hersh, 1970, pp. 39-40).

Regardless, on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup>, Calley's platoon entered the village shooting, despite receiving no fire as it approached My Lai 4. All of Charlie Company soon joined in the massacre. Over the next several hours somewhere between 347 and 504 unarmed men, women and children were wantonly slaughtered. Both Calley and Medina were later alleged to have personally killed Vietnamese civilians at My Lai 4 (Hersh, 1970).

After a lengthy government cover up, news of the massacre finally came to light in late 1969 when journalist Seymour Hersh published an expose on the incident in *The New York Times*. A few months earlier, in September, the Army had quietly charged Calley with the pre-meditated murder of 109 Vietnamese civilians. He was eventually convicted of 22 counts of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment. No other member of Charlie Company, including Medina, was convicted of a crime for actions taken at My Lai 4. However, after the intervention of President Richard Nixon in April 1971, Calley would end up serving just three and a half years of house arrest at Fort Benning, Ga (Styron, 1971; Hersh, 1972; Johnson, 2000).

By Spring 1970, Calley had offered to sell the rights to his story to *Esquire*. But editor Harold Hayes, convinced that his magazine should once again lead the way in helping Americans understand what was happening in Vietnam, could not find a writer willing to take on so contentious a project. The legendary John Hersey, journalist William Styron, and even Hayes' close friend Garry Wills had all refused to associate themselves with the story of so cold-blooded a killer. A chance meeting when Sack stopped by the *Esquire* offices one day solved the problem (Polsgrove, 1995).

For his part, Sack had followed Calley's story in the conventional press, but once again felt that traditional journalistic coverage was not up to the task of capturing the truth about so complex a subject. Before deciding, however, he wanted to meet Calley to determine whether there was indeed a flesh-and-blood man hidden beneath the media-constructed image of cold-blooded killer. Hayes arranged for a meeting in Sack's New York apartment, and the two hit it off immediately. Over drinks, Calley began opening up, describing the pain and disappointment he felt at wanting to do good, wanting to help—reasons he said he had joined the Army in the first place. But in Vietnam, Calley said, the Army had devolved into a monster, roaming across the land killing those it had supposedly been sent to help.

Sack was stunned. He had never heard a soldier talk like that. Calley, the man accused of murdering more than one hundred villagers in a hamlet in Vietnam, was coming across as the most considerate, the most compassionate, the most caring soldier of any he had met in Vietnam. (Polsgrove, 1995, p. 220)

Sack accepted Hayes' offer, even temporarily relocating to the little town of Phoenix City, Ala., just across the river from Calley's quarters at Fort Benning, Ga. The two eventually hunkered down at a nearby lake cabin for several weeks, mixing the interview process with a healthy dose of water skiing, swimming—and not a little drinking. Sack was getting to know Calley as a human being. But in doing so, Sack was again breaking a cardinal rule of traditional

journalism, one that dictated that reporters keep an objective distance from those they write about. But to Sack, this was folly (Polsgrove, 1995; Stewart, 1997).

‘You might lose your objectivity, but you get closer to the truth.’ Only by forming a personal relationship with someone, by getting past defense mechanisms, he said, can a reporter understand the motives behind the words and deeds. If that is accomplished, he believes, it results in a fairer, more accurate story, and subjects will not feel betrayed even when the story reports that they have done something that will bring societal disapproval. ‘Other reporters think that you get to the truth by asking people questions and by writing down what they say. I think that’s madness.’ (Stewart, 1997, p.10)

What resulted was a three-part series for *Esquire*, a largely sympathetic portrayal of the young officer as a scapegoat for a system gone wrong. Sack chose to write the story in Calley’s voice, allowing the accused murderer to speak directly to the reader. But with opposition to the war at its peak, the piece generated a firestorm of protest from both the public and even among certain members of the *Esquire* staff. The cover story for November 1970, “The Confessions of Lieutenant Calley” also featured perhaps George Lois’ most infamous cover art, that of a smiling William Calley surrounded by Asian children. Staff members were appalled, several high-profile advertisers pulled their ads, and even Hayes’ own secretary, Connie Wood, threatened to resign in protest (Polsgrove, 1995).

And protests, enraged advertisers, and dissention among *Esquire*’s ranks were not the only troubles facing Sack. During Calley’s trial, Sack was called to the stand to testify but would not answer questions. After refusing to turn over notes and tape recordings of his interview sessions with Calley, Sack was arrested and indicted on felony charges. Only a technicality saved him from jail. Upon review of the court transcripts, Sack’s attorneys found that the judge had never officially ordered him to testify and relinquish evidence. Prosecutors were forced to drop the charges, and Sack went on to publish *Lieutenant Calley: His Own Story*, the book-length version of his *Esquire* articles, in 1971 (Stewart, 1997).

## Analysis

*Lieutenant Calley: His Own Story* is a first-person narrative, written by Sack in Calley's voice, which recounts the young Army officer's experiences before, during and after the My Lai 4 massacre for which he would eventually be convicted of the premeditated murders of 22 Vietnamese civilians. But a strong and recurrent thread running through Calley's account is the question of just what constitutes a *civilian* in an unconventional war like that in Vietnam. On the one hand, Vietnam was a conflict in which Vietcong guerillas wore no uniforms and blended seamlessly into the population. But on the other—and perhaps no less daunting to American GIs—was the idea that many “civilians” were either active or passive supporters of the Vietcong, regardless of whether they actually picked up rifles or set booby traps.

Either you've been in Vietnam in combat, or you'll never understand it. You'll say a VC is a Vietnamese man with weapons and a civilian – ‘He has a house. He works every day. He comes home for dinner. He thinks – ah, good thoughts. A civilian.’ But if you're ever in combat – well, a combat officer knows that he just can't say, ‘Who is VC around here?’ His enemies, in America are often called civilians. (Sack, 1971, p.9)

And Calley makes clear that this idea is not based on speculation but on real-world encounters faced everyday by American GIs like himself and others.

We once caught a VC ten years old in a Vietnamese army minefield that he had been digging up. In his little bag he had four mines: the fifth had blown up, though, the whole right side of his face had blown off. Another time, we saw in some paddies lots of bouncing betties with a straw in the safety holes. And knew, a *farmer is relocating them. It's rice-planting time.* In fact, so many relocated mines that the Army said, ‘We don't know anymore where the minefields are.’ A unit could be far outside of the colored circles, and it would see a bouncing betty pop up. And tear about thirty holes in a GI's belly. Cut him in half. (Sack, 1971, p.70)

In another scene, Calley describes the GI's frustration of trying to determine friend from foe upon entering Vietnamese villages in the province.

Something new: we went to a Vietnamese village where the GI morale went up. Someone there had been shooting us with mortar shells even, but, of course, when we got there everyone was an old papasan, an old mamas an, or a child saying, ‘We love the GIs.’ Everyone was friendly until we started to turn up VC flags. I realized then, *We were being*

*taunted. We were being made a mockery of. And damn it: when we moved out of this village and we were a hundred meters from it, they again socked it to us. (Sack, 1971, p.63)*

Indeed, Calley's unit had patrolled the province for three months, through dozens of villages, but had still not seen a single "VC." But Charlie Company continued to lose men nonetheless, some to sniper fire, others to booby traps. But it was on one particularly gruesome day – the company suffered 18 casualties, including six dead, when it stumbled into a minefield near a Vietnamese village—that Calley and others began to grasp their situation.

If you're a GI who has lost eighteen friends in a minefield with a Vietnamese village a few hundred meters away – well. You think, *Why didn't the Vietnamese signal us? Why didn't the Vietnamese tell us, 'Hey, there's a minefield there.' Why didn't the Vietnamese help us? Or Christ! Or simply say afterwards, 'We're sorry about it.'* Never: they sat in front of their hooches talking, twiddling thumbs, and all saying, 'Gee, I see an American unit,' 'I wonder what it is doing,' 'I know what it is doing,' 'Hahaha.' If these people won't lift a finger, a GI will say, *Goddamn them. I'm here to help these people, and they couldn't care less.* (Sack, 1971, p.74)

After the minefield incident, Charlie Company's attitude toward the people changed dramatically.

It was dead solemn now: it did no childish horsing around when it went through a Vietnamese village. The GIs had been infatuated with the Vietnamese children. No more: now as they reached a Vietnamese village and children said, 'Give me, give me,' and threw their arms around the GIs, the GIs just kicked them off and busted through. As they're supposed to! Intelligence said: If there are a hundred kids in a village, where are the men? They're getting the hell out of it. Or getting ready to zap us while we're tied up talking to nice sweet kids. I thought, *It's sad:* Intelligence had a VC code saying this was a VC tactic now. Those kids had been following us right to where we would RON (remain overnight). And been telling the VC, 'They're there.' (Sack, 1971, p.73)

Members of Charlie, including Calley, soon began to resort to coercion and intimidation to convince villages to tell them where the VC were. Villagers would sometimes be kicked and beaten. Other times, Calley would carry out mock executions out of sight of the other villagers. But nothing seemed to work. Then, Calley had a revelation:

I realized, *I've been foolish.* I had been asking everyone where the VC were: I had been talking to VC myself! That is why everyone said, 'I don't know.' They weren't about to

tell me, 'I surrender.' At last it dawned on me, *These people, they're all the VC*. We had an AO (area of operations) of five hundred square kilometers, and if those people weren't all VC then prove it to me. Show me that someone was for the American forces there. Show me that someone helped us and fought the VC. Show me that someone wanted us: one example only! I didn't see any. A story: I used to see wicker baskets everywhere. And every basket was upside down, I could see. Strange: but Intelligence said if Americans are around, it's a VC signal to turn their baskets upside down. And everyone's basket was upside down. (Sack, 1971, p.79)

And in still another scene:

My duty in our whole area was to find, to close with, and to destroy the VC. I had now found the VC. Everyone there was VC. The old men, the women, the children – the *babies* were all VC or would be VC in about three years. And inside of VC women, I guess there were a thousand little VC now. On babies everyone's really hung up. 'But babies! The little innocent babies!' Of course, we've been in Vietnam for ten years now. If we're in Vietnam another ten, if your son is killed by those babies you'll cry at me, 'Why didn't you kill those babies that day?' (Sack, 1971, pp.84-102)

But it was not just Calley and his men who were convinced that supposedly friendly villages were in fact teeming with VC and sympathizers. The idea permeated military thinking from training to the field.

One thing at OCS [officer candidate school] was nobody said, 'Now, there will be innocent civilians there.' Oh sure, there will be in Saigon. In the secure areas, the Vietnamese may be clapping the way the French in the '44 newsreels do, 'Yay for America!' But we would be somewhere else: be in VC country. It was drummed into us, 'Be sharp! On guard! As soon as you think these people won't kill you, ZAP! In combat you haven't friends! You have enemies!' Over and over at OCS we heard this, and I told myself, *I'll act as if I'm never secure. As if everyone in Vietnam would do me in. As if everyone's bad.* (Sack, 1971, p.28)

In the following scene, Calley describes his frustration after learning that an armed Vietcong he had captured and turned over to military police had been released without incident.

I told myself, *God. He has probably killed two or three of us. And the MPs didn't do a damn thing with him.* I went there angry: I said, 'My God! I didn't call him a VCS,' a VC suspect. 'I said a VC!' 'Well, fine: So why didn't you go and shoot him? I can't,' the MP said. 'I'm at headquarters with the Geneva people on me.' 'But you've got a POW camp!' 'A prisoner, I've got to give him a bed, a blanket, a pillow, and three square meals every day. And so many cubic meters space: I haven't space.' 'But god! The guy's a VC!' 'All these guys are VC. But they could tell me, 'I'm Egyptian,' and I'd have to believe them.' 'I'd love to be in the field with you. I'd take every prisoner and I'd kill every damn one. Do it, Lieutenant, or you're going to see these people back.' (Sack, 1971, pp.82-83)

Indeed, Calley reports that this opinion was widespread among American servicemen, from privates to generals.

Everyone said eliminate them. I never met someone who didn't say it. A captain told me, 'Goddamn it. I sit with my starlight scope, and I see VC at this village every night. I could go home if I could eliminate it.' A colonel: he told me about a general's briefing where the general said, 'By god, if you're chasing dead VC and you're chasing them to that village, do it! I'll answer for it! I'll answer for it!' The general was in a rage saying, 'Damn, and I'll lose my stars tomorrow if I tell those politicians who haven't been out of their bathtubs that.' And Americans will say, *It's wrong*, if American women fought in Vietnam, but the VC women do it. And the VC kids: and everyone in our task force knew, *We have to drop the bomb sometime*. (Sack, 1971, p.84)

This notion was reinforced the night before Charlie Company was to air assault into My Lai 4. Captain Medina reminded his men of what had happened to Alpha and Brava companies when they had tried the same thing a few months before in the surrounding hamlets. The area, nicknamed "Pinkville" because its red color on GI maps indicated a strong Vietcong presence, had been the scene of heavy American casualties as fire poured in from all sides.

And you're being fired on from front and behind: from the 'civilians' in My Lai 6. The old men, women, and children there are in the battalion, really: the irregulars. And they're firing, and they're arming mines, and they're triggering them. And if they're with you as POWs they're pulling pins out of your damn grenades. And you're saying, 'God! They're everywhere,' and you're running in every which way. And you're dying like flies: it happened to Alpha, it happened to Bravo, it would happen to Charlie tomorrow. (Sack, 1971, p.88)

It was then that Calley alleges Medina gave his now-infamous order regarding treatment of My Lai 4 civilians.

'We mustn't let anyone get behind us,' Medina said, as I remember it. 'Alpha and Bravo got messed up because they let the VC get behind them. And took heavy casualties and lost their momentum, and it was their downfall. Our job,' Medina said, 'is to go in rapidly and to neutralize everything. To kill everything.' 'Captain Medina? Do you mean women and children too?' 'I mean everything.' (Sack, 1971, p.89)

While Medina later denied giving this order, saying that troopers should have exercised common sense in determining friend from foe, Calley points to counter testimony that seems to support his version of the pre-assault briefing.

No other witness heard him say, 'You have to use common sense.' One eye-witness was Sergeant Schiel: 'A person, I don't know who, a person sitting below me brought forth the question, 'Do you mean everything?' Medina said, 'Everything. Men, women, children, cats, dogs: everything.' A soldier whose name was Moss said, 'He said, 'It was *all* VC and VC sympathizers,' and Flynn said, 'He replied, kill everything that moves.' A total of twenty-one soldiers testified for me. 'He told us that everything, we was to kill it,' Sergeant Cowen. 'He didn't want to see anything living but GIs,' Kinch. '*Anything*, whether it be men, women, or children,' Fagan. 'There were no innocent civilians in My Lai. Men, women, children,' Haywood. 'We were told to destroy it,' Sergeant Mahoney. (Sack, 1971, pp.90-91)

But even if Medina gave—and Calley carried out—the order, Sack emphasizes that Charlie Company was simply carrying on in the same tradition that had already been set in Vietnam by American policymakers and military commanders. In the following scene, Calley describes the pressure for field units to compile “body counts.”

It got so, I cringed if I ever heard helicopter blades. Our colonel would look for VC suspects from – oh, ten thousand feet, and play platoon leader with us. 'Oh, Charlie One? I spotted a VC suspect. Go where the purple smoke is, Charlie One. Get the VC, Charlie One?' 'Yeah.' 'Get any body count?' 'No. It might be a farmer there with a wooden hoe. He seems friendly.' 'Oh does he? He has that goddamn corral there. Destroy it.' 'You want to destroy it? All right,' I would say, and I would tear the corral apart, get all the wood together, get a hot fire going. 'You didn't get a body count?' 'No.' 'You better start doing the job, Lieutenant, or I'll find someone who can.' (Sack, 1971, pp.46-47)

And in another scene:

The generals said, 'We must deprive the VC of their population resource.' I've even seen in *The Limits of Intervention*, the Assistant Secretary of Defense. He said, 'Our policy seems to be: destroy the villages, defoliate the jungles, and cover all of Vietnam with asphalt.' (Sack, 1971, p.125)

Indeed, as Calley points out, nothing in the actions of Charlie Company that day in My Lai 4 were alien to American policy in Vietnam.

We had killed three hundred thousand civilians there, a Senate committee said, we had wounded five hundred thousand more, we had made four million refugees. We had search and destroy operations every day, we had shot artillery every night, and we had bombed more in Vietnam: in South Vietnam, than in Japan, Germany, Italy, and Korea. And then killed their crops, and I wish the colonel [at Calley's trial] in Washington had asked me, 'Lieutenant Calley? This is about the American war in Vietnam.' He didn't though. He said, 'This is about an operation on 16 March 1968 in the village of My Lai Four.' I couldn't understand it. An investigation of My Lai? Why not Operation Golden Fleece? Or

Operation Norfolk Victory? Or Operation Dragon Valley? Or why not Saigon itself? We had killed hundreds of men, women, and children there in February and March, 1968: in Tet. The colonel didn't have to ask about it: simply read it in *Stars and Stripes*. Or *The New York Times*. If you're dead you're dead, and I don't think you'll care if an F-4 [fighter-bomber] or an M-16 [rifle] did it. Why didn't the Army investigate that? It was as though all of My Lai: of Vietnam, was now being blamed on me. (Sack, 1971, pp.147-149)

And Calley noted with irony his charge of “premeditated murder”:

He said I had done premeditated murder there. It's true: I sat up with sergeants in the wee hours of March 16, 1968, and I plotted to kill those people in My Lai Four. I filled up the cartridge clips, and god! How premeditated can you get? Or course, in Vietnam we called it a combat assault. (Sack, 1971, p. 23)

If finally dawned on Calley why he was being singled out:

It had been headline news, the My Lai assault, and *Life* had those color photographs of it. A screaming woman. A crying child. A row of dead women, children, and babies halfway into My Lai. And the American government couldn't say, 'Oh, that's how it is in Vietnam, everyone.' It had to protect two million veterans and two hundred million citizens. It had to tell everyone, 'A mad killer did it.' (Sack, 1971, p.169)

But in the end, Calley asserts that all Americans, from the president on down, are just as guilty as he for what happened in My Lai and the rest of Vietnam.

For years, we Americans all have taken the easy way out. And been hypocritical fools. And gone around saying, 'I'm nice. I'm sweet. I'm innocent.' 'You killed a thousand people today.' 'Who me?' 'You sent the Army to My Lai and...' 'That wasn't me! That was Lieutenant Calley!' No, that isn't right for America. I say if there's guilt, we must suffer it. And learn. And change. And go on. For that is what guilt must really be for. (Sack, 1971, p.174)

### Conclusion

Several frames are evident in Sack's treatment of Calley and his experiences in Vietnam.

Again we see the “**Invincible Enemy**” frame first noted in Chapter 4. The Vietcong are portrayed as being ghostlike in their elusiveness and almost omniscient in their ability to kill American GIs at will and with little risk to themselves. Conversely, the “**Reluctant/Incompetent American Soldier**” frame is also present once again, with troopers portrayed as ineffectual and

bumbling as they stumble from one disaster to the next. The men are shown to be fearful, frustrated and impotent as they search in vain for the phantom force that is killing them.

The “**Vietnamese as Impediment**” frame is also present again, with villagers portrayed as indifferent and unwilling to help American GIs combat the Vietcong. This frame can be described as then morphing into a newer version of itself: “**Civilians as Vietcong**,” where, rather than simply being recalcitrant in their unwillingness to help, the villagers themselves are now defined as being the enemy. We learn from the text that this enemy can include old men, women, children, even babies.

A frame of “**Inhumane American Policy**” also emerges from the text. Brutal and indiscriminate bomb and artillery attacks against civilian population areas are portrayed as acceptable—indeed, the norm—within American military policy. The accumulation of body counts, even those that include “Vietcong civilians,” are shown to be approved of and encouraged by American field commanders, from generals down to sergeants. As a corollary, the text could be described as posing the rhetorical question: “What is the difference between killing masses of civilians from the air, and killing them face to face in villages like My Lai 4?”

This frame can be linked directly to a previously established frame: “**America’s Collective Guilt**.” Here, the text suggests that the responsibility for what happened in My Lai 4—and by extension, the rest of Vietnam—must be shared not only by America’s leadership, military, and men like Calley, but by its people as well.

Finally, a master frame encompassing many of those above: “**Calley as Scapegoat**.” Indeed, Calley is portrayed as simply following the lead of not only his immediate superior, Captain Medina, but of the overall American military policy in Vietnam. Calley, the text suggests, only did in My Lai 4 what the American military had been doing in the rest of the

country the previous four years. But rather than admit that its policy was flawed—indeed, immoral—the American military chose instead to single out Calley as an aberration.

## CHAPTER 7 COMPANY C

### **Background**

On August 2, 1990, an army of approximately 120,000 Iraqi troops, spearheaded by nearly 850 tanks, invaded the tiny Persian Gulf emirate of Kuwait to its south. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, his country devastated following a recently concluded, eight-year war with neighboring Iran, accused Kuwait of committing “economic warfare” against his nation by increasing oil production, thus helping to starve Iraq’s already crippled economy of desperately needed oil revenues. As further *causus belli*, Iraq claimed that Kuwait was in actuality a renegade province from the days of the Ottoman Empire, and that it had also long been engaged in stealing Iraqi oil by cross-border drilling into the Ramaila oil fields. Just two days after the invasion had begun, Iraqi forces had routed Kuwaiti defenders and taken control of the country (Finlan, 2003).

The United Nations Security Council, led by the United States, condemned the invasion and put into place economic sanctions in hopes of driving the Iraqis out. The United States, fearful that Iraq would also move to seize neighboring Saudi Arabia’s valuable Hama oil fields—thus placing more than 50 percent of the world’s known reserves in the hands of Saddam—deployed a small ground force contingent to Saudi Arabia as a deterrent to further Iraqi aggression. U.S. President George H.W. Bush then set about forming an international coalition for the possible armed expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. In its final incarnation, this coalition numbered 34 nations, with the United States and United Kingdom supplying the bulk of men and materiel. Iraq, however, remained recalcitrant. After a lengthy buildup of nearly half a million troops, and thousands of tanks and aircraft, the U.N. Security Council on November 29 passed Resolution 678 authorizing the use of force if Iraq had not withdrawn by the January 15,

1991 deadline. Three days before the deadline, the U.S. Congress voted to approve military action to expel Iraq from Kuwait (Summers, 1995).

On January 16, coalition forces launched a massive air campaign against Iraqi forces in Kuwait and throughout Iraq. Iraqi military units, command and control assets, weapons caches, and infrastructure were all targeted. At its peak, the campaign saw coalition aircraft flying 1,000 sorties a day, many employing stunning new “smart” weapons which enabled allied fighters and bombers to target and destroy enemy assets with extreme precision. After a series of minor probing ground attacks by both sides, coalition forces commenced full-scale invasion on February 24. Contrary to Saddam’s prediction that coalition forces would drive directly into the heart of Kuwait—and the bulk of his defenses—allied units under the direction of U.S. Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf instead affected the now-famous “left hook,” with armored forces sweeping to the west and then behind entrenched Iraqi defenders. It took just 100 hours of the ground war before Iraq surrendered and agreed to withdraw from Kuwait (Finlan, 2003).

The Persian Gulf War was also one of the most heavily covered conflicts in history. Media outlets from all over the world were on hand to record nearly every moment of the action. Satellite communications, still in their infancy during the Vietnam War, now allowed for the nearly instantaneous transmission of images and commentary from the theater of conflict. But this did not necessarily equate to greater press freedom. Indeed, where Vietnam-era reporters were allowed to roam freely about the battlefield, Gulf War journalists were instead forced to adhere to the pool system, whereby access to the battlefield, soldiers and other sources of information within the theater was tightly controlled by the Pentagon. Journalists were obliged to obtain the bulk of their information from official military briefings (Fialka, 1992; Mordan, 1999).

Many of these briefing sessions gained a notoriety unto themselves, as public information officers dazzled reporters and the world with taped video footage demonstrating America's new precision wonder weapons. Some critics charged that such briefings helped engender a sense of a conflict that was easy, push-button and bloodless. And still others contend that the pool system in general constituted an undue restriction on the press' free access to news. The Pentagon, on the other hand, defended its approach to media coverage, citing the need to closely guard information that could harm ongoing coalition operations in a time of instantaneous satellite broadcasts (Fialka, 1992; Mordan, 1999; Williams, 1992; Woodward, 1993).

For his part, then 60-year-old Sack saw the war as a chance to repeat the experiment he had started with M Company a quarter century before. He would follow an American unit from training into combat. He once again sold the idea to *Esquire* magazine, and soon settled on Company C, a tank company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 34<sup>th</sup> Armored Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division based in Fort Riley, Kansas. Sack even sent along a copy of *M* to Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf—himself a Vietnam veteran—along with his request to accompany C Company to war. The general approved, and Sack linked up with C at Fort Riley, where the unit was undergoing final training for duty in the Gulf (Lipsey, 1995).

C arrived in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia on New Year's Day, 1991, with Sack following a few days later. But military red tape kept him from linking up with his adopted unit, as C moved into position out in the Saudi desert. Undaunted, Sack defied military edicts, obtained a Jeep Cherokee, and set out across the desert to find C. Once there, Sack was hidden by some of the soldiers, only to be discovered by commanders and sent back to Dhahran. It was not until February 7—armed with fresh credentials after other print journalists had voted him on to the press pool—that Sack would once again link up with C. The aging journalist remained with his

unit for the remainder of the war, including throughout the Battle of Al Qarnain, still the largest tank engagement ever fought by U.S. forces. Tape recorder and notepad in hand, Sack trailed C Company's command tank in a Humvee, recording the sights, sounds and even smell of battle. His unique vantage point also allowed him to listen in as the frantic conversations of C's tankers crackled over the radio transmitters (Stewart, 1997; Lipsey, 1995).

As before, Sack writes not about grand strategy, but about the grunts on the ground tasked with implementing it. There is little mention of airpower or wonder weapons, here. Instead, Sack endeavors to take the reader inside a U.S. M-1 Abrams tank company as it hurtles—quite uncertainly—toward its rendezvous with the Iraqi Republican Guard. As with his previous work, Sack pulls no punches as he describes in gritty detail the fear, profanity and utter confusion of soldiers in combat. Sack ended up being the only accredited journalist—out of more than 1,500 in the Gulf—to remain with a frontline combat unit throughout the conflict, and the resulting three articles for *Esquire* in 1991 showed he had not lost his knack for capturing men in combat. Sack later expanded his Gulf War coverage into the 1995 book *Company C: The Real War in Iraq* (Stewart, 1997; Lipsey, 1995; Donahue, 1995; Conover, 1995).

### **Analysis**

The “reluctant/incompetent soldier” had been a strong and recurrent frame in Sack's Vietnam War journalism. Not so, with Company C, however. Rather, the tank soldiers covered by Sack are largely portrayed as aggressive and eager—sometimes too much so—in their desire to meet and defeat their Iraqi opponents. Indeed, so called “friendly fire” incidents—where allied units accidentally fired on one another—accounted for nearly 20 percent of coalition casualties during the war (Summers, 1995). Deeply concerned about inter-unit fratricide, it is Company C's commander, not his troops, who is framed as being overly cautious in engaging the enemy. It is this conflict that forms a major frame within the narrative of *Company C*.

The first friendly fire incident that C encountered was early in the war as the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division stood ready to advance into Iraq. At one in the morning, two attack helicopter pilots responded to a call about what they thought were Iraqi tanks. Loosing Hellfire missiles, the choppers incinerated the “tanks,” only to discover that they were actually Bradley armored personnel carriers loaded with American troops. The next morning, C learned that two Americans had died, with another six horrifically burned.

And the most distressed person in C was its Captain Burns. Burns hadn't been in a war before, but at nineteen he'd encountered death in Missouri, he'd been in the woods with a Colt rifle, *splat!* and the heart of an eight-point deer was an oak-tree ornament, the blood was the contents of every curled leaf. *It's dead*, Burns had thought. *It never will run. It never will get its ninth antler*, and though he hadn't stopped hunting, he'd thought of how very long *never* is, of how a deer never emerges from it, and when he'd come to Saudi, he'd resolved that the smallest – *smallest* – fraction of C would succumb to that dead-ended status, death. And today when he learned that Americans were *hoo-wee!* Were crippled, killed, when he saw that he couldn't control all the TNT around C, he resolved that, if nothing else, he'd ensure that the words on C's tomb wouldn't be 'We have met the enemy: us.' 'We,' he announced to C, 'are a greater danger to ourselves than the Iraqis are,' and he said to C: No ammo. No loaded weapons. If he didn't approve it, authorize it, no shooting at the Iraqis. None. (Sack, 1995, pp.83-84)

But the young tankers of C, eager to kill before they themselves were killed, could not believe their ears.

C was appalled. Why, there was a goddamned war on! By night and day the Iraqis were creeping up, the Iraqis got two thousand meters away, they looked at C with binoculars, wigwagged their flags, and *dit dit!* tapped out in Morse, the Iraqis had guns, mortars, vehicles, had rounds that as yet – *as yet* – hadn't hit anyone in C. Often, C saw an Iraqi and radioed up, 'Black six,' Burns' radio code, and 'May we engage him?' and Burns, well, *practically*, radioed back, 'Where is he? What is he wearing? Are you sure he's not an American? That he's not the colonel? That he's not a PFC who's lost? Can you see if he's wearing dog tags? Can you ask him who won the Super Bowl? Are you *sure* he's not one of us?' C thought, *The captain's crazy*. (Sack, 1995, pp.84-85)

C's incredulity at its captain soon transformed into outright contempt, as the company moved into Iraq and began to contact the enemy. The following scene describes Burns as he directs his tanks toward entrenched Iraqi positions. C sees an opportunity to finally kill the enemy; Burns sees nothing but potential disaster.

‘Be careful. Be careful,’ said Burns, Nervous Nellie, Worrywart Willie, on C’s crackling radios now, and his voice was drizzle on C’s little picnic. Was someone in C going faster than five mph? ‘Slow down,’ said Burns. Was someone in C going teenily, weenily, off his course? ‘Don’t cut in front of me, man,’ said Burns. Was there a dirt road in front of C? ‘Stay the hell off it. It could be mined,’ said Old Mister Party Poop. Were there any – *eek* – any anthills in front of C? ‘I don’t know what these are but they could be mines,’ said Burns, who didn’t seem to understand he was pissing off C, which didn’t think it needed a six-foot-two mom (a mom with a mustache) to tell it, ‘Do this, Do that.’ ‘We’re getting a little too cocky,’ said Burns. ‘So slow down and think about what life and death is about...’ ‘Oh, how C hated him! C didn’t see that Burns was obsessed, *obsessed*, with the life of each soldier in C, that he’d have felt reckless if he’d said nothing but ‘*Charge.*’ (Sack, 1995, p.114)

But C’s hatred continued to grow. In the following scene, Burns berates a lieutenant in a Bradley for firing without permission—even though the soldier’s actions very likely saved the life of his captain. Indeed, after Burns used his tank to run over an Iraqi soldier, another popped up ready to destroy the tank by firing a rocket propelled grenade into its vulnerable rear grill.

Nevertheless, Burns becomes enraged when he realizes someone is firing without his say-so.

‘God *damn* it! Get under *control!*’ cried Burns, who still hadn’t seen the Iraqi rag. ‘I *told* you to ask *permission* first!’ In the Bradley the gunner turned down the Walkman. ‘Tell that asshole,’ he said to the scrappy lieutenant, ‘the guy had an RPG.’ ‘*Explain* to me,’ Burns cried. ‘What the *fuck* are you doing?’ ‘I covered your back door,’ the lieutenant said unflinchingly, but Burns was obsessed by the murderous friendly fire on him and on Company B. ‘I have *told* you to ask *permission!*’ said Burns. ‘Now that is the *last fuckin’ time!*’ In the gloom below him sat Anderson, Burns’ driver, thinking, *My God! We’d have eaten a rocket before you said, ‘Fire.’* Anderson wanted to shout to Burns, ‘Do you know what you sounded like? A fuckin’ bloomin’ idiot, and the whole company heard you,’ and the gunner and loader were scandalized too. The gunner thought, *Hell – if I were Lieutenant Homer, I’d never cover Burns again.* (Sack, 1995, p.146)

Indeed, some members of C even began to speculate about killing–*fragging*–their captain, a man whose stultifying caution would surely spell disaster as the company rolled closer to its confrontation with Saddam’s vaunted Republican Guard. The conspirators even settled on the codeword “gizmo” as the signal for action. In the following scene, Burns’s insistence on keeping a stranglehold on firing protocol—even as C comes face to face with Saddam’s elite Tawakalna division—nearly costs him his life at the hands of his own men.

Burns' loader, Sergeant Medine, thought, *Someone should gizmo him. But who?* The last straw came when a startled commander saw an Iraqi leviathan, an Iraqi killing machine, and said, "Tank!!! Direct front!!!" 'What range? What azimuth?' said Burns, still like a prissy professor at MIT. '1300!!! Direct front!!!" 'That's bullshit,' said Burns. 'Direct front is not an azimuth, send me a proper report or I won't accept it. Permission denied.' And then Burns said, 'Out.' Medine thought, *The man's irrational.* Where did he think he was, in a little girl's game of Simon says? Go Back, You Didn't Say May I? He was at war and a cannon was aimed at four of his troops, four friends of Medine's, *It's their life or Burns'*. Someone in C, he thought, should do some triage: the captain should die and the sergeants and specialists live, someone in C should do as in chess: should give up a castle and get two knights, *I'll kill him*, Medine decided, *and I'll enjoy every minute of it.* On his chest was a holster, then a Beretta, he grabbed the holster, unsnapped it, grabbed the Beretta, and – and duty prevailed. He slowly let go. (Sack, 1995, pp.159-160)

The situation only deteriorated as C and its sister units pushed deeper into Iraq, only to swing back south again for the push into the Iraqi rear flank. Hour after hour of intense combat, coupled with a lack of sleep, rendered the tankers of C exhausted and near delirium, even as it stumbled unwittingly into an Iraqi ambush. Indeed, just over the Iraq-Kuwait border lay a patchwork of raised mounds ideal for concealing enemy tanks. As C groggily maneuvered its tanks through the furrows between the "booger" mounds, struggling not ram one another, confusion set in. Worse yet, scores of other 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry tanks and Bradley's became entangled with C and her sister companies, their dark shapes rendered incomprehensible in the green glow of C's night-vision scopes. Further complicating matters was the fact that none of the new vehicles could communicate by radio with C and its fellow units. The following scene describes the confusion when Burns and others believe C has already destroyed a pair of Bradleys and fired on another.

On one tank in C, the commander [Sergeant James] looked to his left, looked to where the two Bradleys were, and saw – well, he *thought* that he saw an Iraqi tank. James tried to tell this to Burns. But another commander was on C's radios, saying, 'We have another T-55,' a T-55 far ahead of C, and Burns was replying, 'We're dorked right now. I can't *begin* to have confidence it's not a friendly,' and James couldn't cut in. To his tired eyes, the Iraqi tank moved, the turret turned, the cannon pointed at one of C's vulnerable grills and James cried immediately, 'Fire!' 'White!' the lieutenant cried, *white* was his four collected tanks. 'Don't fire till you got *permission!*' then onto C's radios came Burns. 'White! White! White!' said Burns. His words were stones, they fell with an awful finality. 'Cease!

Fuckin'! Fire!' 'Cease fire!, ' the colonel radioed to Burns. 'You may have shot a Bradley!' 'Who shot? Who shot? White two,' Burns asked, 'Did you open fire?' 'Roger,'" said Sergeant James. And crump. Something in Burns went limp. Burns was a man who'd been de-boned. (Sack, 1995, pp.179-181)

But while Burns, the colonel and others initially believed C had killed its own, all three "Bradleys" were quickly found to be Iraqi tanks laying in ambush. C's instinctive disregard for Burns' caution had saved lives.

But even as C is portrayed as righteously insubordinate—even to the point of killing its commanding officer—and eager to fight and kill Iraqis, there is also a powerful frame of empathy and compassion for their enemy, as well. In the following scene, C is overwhelmed—and relieved—as waves of Iraqis come forward to surrender.

[C] used their red-and-white headaddresses to tie their hands behind them. It thought, *We won't have to kill them now*, and it was grateful to these two hundred sensible men. [Captain John Bushyhead] now went among the Iraqis saying, 'Don't worry! Don't worry! We won't hurt you!' He patted his shoulder and said, 'We're Americans,' patted the Iraqis, too, put his palms in the Indian-from-India salutation, saluted. He said to the English-speaking man, 'We'll feed you! We'll get you water! We'll abide by the Geneva Convention! We'll treat you well!' (Sack, 1995, pp.108-109)

In another scene, C, who moments before was prepared to kill, now could feel nothing but pity as yet another wave of bedraggled Iraqis came forth to surrender. Indeed, perhaps against even common sense, C distributes its own food and water to their erstwhile enemy.

Not stopping, C shouted, '*Go south*,' but the Iraqis patted their lips like Indians going 'Woo woo,' and C, interpreting this as 'We're hungry,' tossed them a carton of MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] or, somewhat mischievously, a bag of MRE pork ('But that's against their religion, isn't it?') As the food hit the sand, the Iraqis just dove on it, dove like on fumbled footballs, dove in front of C's roaring tanks, and '*Hey!*' the commanders shouted, '*watch out!*' In time, C was tossing out MREs as if it were fleeing from wolves. The bags of beef stew, chicken stew, of pears, peaches, applesauce, of maple cakes, cherry cakes, and even of Tootsie Rolls were C's letters to the Iraqis, 'We didn't want to kill you, and now we don't have to. Thank you.' C, as the colonel had said, was from the block and the barrio, and it had sympathy for the Iraqi unfortunates. One boy in C was weeping. The boy, a medic, rode in a red-crossed vehicle that the Iraqis were herding around, patting their lips and, like Barbary pirates, trying to climb aboard, and the boy was Saint Bridget in his largess with his MREs. Weeping, he handed them out, but the Iraqis squabbled and cursed, and pulled the MREs from their buddies' pockets, and he had to pacify them by

tossing more. At last someone in C said, 'We'll be beggin' like *them*,' the driver accelerated, the Iraqis chased after him, and the saint tossed the last of his MREs, still weeping. (Sack, 1995, pp.134-135)

And even after the fight with the vaunted Tawalkana division, C's special nemesis, there was still room for compassion. C surveyed the destruction, as the burned-out hulks of countless Iraqi tanks shared their sandy resting place with equally countless Iraqi corpses, some so ripped and destroyed as to make them nearly unrecognizable as human. But there were still more Iraqis who were alive, hiding filthy and cringing in makeshift bunkers. When they spotted C, most happily surrendered.

A lot of Iraqis grabbed C's hands, wrists and arms and kissed them, and C laughed and said, 'I'm not into that.' C was gentle again. It told the Iraqis, 'We won't hurt you,' and took their rifles but not their money or Korans. It gave them MREs, and when the Iraqis signaled *no* and pointed to C's right hands, C gave them the MREs with C's right hands. It told the Iraqis, 'Go west,' meaning 'Go to the POW camps,' but out of pity it sometimes told them, 'Go home.' One boy in C who'd studied his *Soldier's Guide* said, 'Shammal,' meaning 'North,' and pointed to Baghdad, and one boy squatted and, in the sand, drew a square house, square door, square windows, and at the side a wide-skirted wife and a child, then he told the Iraqi, 'Go home.' The boy (and the rest of C) wanted to go home too. (Sack, 1995, p.167)

### Conclusion

The frames present in Sack's *Company C* mark a dramatic departure from his previous literary war journalism. Where before American soldiers were framed as apathetic, unsure and of seemingly low quality—the “**Reluctant/Incompetent Soldier**”—the men of C are framed as eager and aggressive to fight and defeat their enemy. This can be described as the “**Enthusiastic/Able Soldier**.” Conversely, C's commander is shown to be the polar opposite of the aggressive officers of Sack's Korean and Vietnam coverage. Sack attaches to Burns certain monikers that drip with ridicule, describing him as a “prissy MIT professor,” “nervous Nellie,” “worrywart Willie,” etc., to further drive home the point—albeit in an attempt to divine what C *might* be thinking of him. This frame can be dubbed the “**Apprehensive Officer**.”

But while C's soldiers are portrayed as aggressive, they are also compassionate—yet another departure from Sack's earlier work. Indeed, the soldiers of Sack's three Vietnam narratives are largely contemptuous—even cruel and sadistic—in their interactions with the populace. The men of C, however, take genuine pity upon their vanquished foes, many of whom were attempting to kill the Americans just hours before. This frame can be described as the **“Benevolent American Soldier.”**

Finally, Sack's narrative can be said to contain a master frame: the **“Fog of War.”** Indeed, all of the above frames can be said to support the overall tone of chaos and uncertainty that permeates the narrative. Exhaustion, confusion, fear, the dilemma of discerning friend from foe, and the strangeness of being in an alien land all work to influence the behavior of not only C's “overly cautious” commander, but his men as well. Even as they are eager to fight and be done with it, C's troopers still harbor a deep fear of the unknown, only exacerbated by a commander's excessive wariness they are sure will result in their demise. To the men of C, the Gulf War was far from “easy” or “push-button.”

## CHAPTER 8 THE DOGS OF BOSNIA

### **Background**

In 1989, the southeast European nation of Yugoslavia, a patchwork state first cobbled together in the aftermath of World War I, began to break apart as various regional ethnicities struggled to reassert their autonomy in the Cold War's waning days. One such case was that of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a multi-ethnic region of central Yugoslavia historically populated by Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Muslim Bosniaks. Initially, the Serbian population favored remaining a part of the newly formed Yugoslav Federation, while Croats and Bosniaks favored the creation of an independent nation. The latter groups voted for independence in March 1992, with the Croats forming the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia, and the Bosniaks maintaining power in the capital of Sarajevo. Bosnian Serbs, however, bolstered by their control over most of the country's military resources, launched a series of attacks aimed at ensuring their dominance in whatever political configuration that prevailed. However, when conflict erupted a year later after the Bosniaks failed to recognize the legitimacy of the newly formed Croat republic, the war was transformed into a three-way bloodbath which would cost the lives of nearly a quarter million people (Kaplan, 1993; Nation, 2004).

While ostensibly a civil war, the three sides received considerable aid in men and materiel from outside parties. The ethnic Croats, naturally, received support from neighboring Croatia, while the Bosniaks were aided by various Islamist groups and even the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. However, ethnic Serbs, bolstered by massive support from nearby Serbia under President Slobodan Milosevic, soon gained the upper hand. Ethnic Serbs also instituted a policy of "ethnic cleansing," whereby non-Serb ethnicities were forcibly removed in order to form contiguous Serb-dominated regions. This process was marked by murder, organized rape, and wide-scale

massacres on all sides, but Bosnian Serbs are widely viewed as committing the majority of atrocities (Burg & Shoup, 2000; Cigar, 1995).

In 1994, NATO intervened to enforce the U.N.-mandated no-fly zone designed to protect civilian populations from Serbian bombing. After initially downing four Serbian aircraft, NATO stepped up its air campaign Operation Deliberate Force throughout 1995 against Bosnian Serb ground forces and infrastructure, especially after new Serbian atrocities in the cities of Srebrenica and Markale came to light. A combination of military and diplomatic pressure finally forced Serb, Croat and Bosniak leaders to the peace table later that year in Dayton, Ohio. On December 14, 1995, the Dayton Accords were officially signed in Paris, bringing the conflict to an end (Nation, 2004).

A central component of the agreement mandated that Bosnia and Herzegovina was to be divided into two separate entities, with ethnic Serbs for the most part inhabiting the Republika Srpska and Bosnian Croats and Muslims residing in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. While many international entities and organizations were empowered to oversee the transition, military peacekeeping fell to NATO and its Implementation Force. IFOR's troop strength would eventually grow to more than 50,000, nearly half of which would be supplied by the United States. On Christmas Day 1995, a tiny fraction of those soldiers—20 to be exact—shipped out for Ulice, Bosnia to help carry out America's will. Known collectively as the Dawg Pound Platoon, it was with the Dawgs that John Sack—this time in his late 60s—once again returned to chronicle America's soldiers at war (Nation, 2004; Sack, 1997).

“The Dogs of Bosnia,” published in the February 1997 edition of *Esquire*, tells the story of 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon, D Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, 20 young American soldiers thrust into the middle of an age-old conflict. With little understanding of their mission—and even

less about the people and cultures they have come to keep at peace—the Dawgs are forced to figure out how things work in “B-Land,” a place that is as brutal and confusing as it is beautiful.

### Analysis

A powerful frame running through Sack’s narrative is that the Dawgs are shockingly uninformed about the situation into which they have been ordered. The young soldiers know very little about the region’s history, the conflict’s combatants or even the basic particulars differentiating one religion from the next. In the following scene, the Dawgs survey the wreckage of an abandoned house in Ulice, its blood-spattered walls seemingly no help in the soldiers’ quest to decipher victims from perpetrators.

‘I’d like to leave,’ the second boy says. ‘It’s turnin’ my stomach that they call it ethical cleansin’ and I call it murder.’ The soldiers walk on. But who are ‘they?’ The ones who did it? Except for the Dawgs, all the people around here are Serbs, Serb soldiers in caps, ragged camouflage clothes, and sloppy boots, and the Dawgs suspect (unfairly, perhaps, for Serbs may have lived here a thousand years) that the perpetrators of all these horrors were Serbs. The victims, the Dawgs suspect, were Muslims, the principal item of evidence being the cross on the closest house to the Dawgs’ tent. The cross, almost two feet high, in the gable facing the Dawgs, was clearly built when the house was - the owner was clearly religious, therefore clearly was Muslim. ‘A lot of the houses got crosses,’ a Dawg says this morning, standing at an old oil drum, putting in branches, warming himself by the flames. ‘I assume they are Muslim houses.’ ‘Yeah,’ says another boy. ‘Muslims believe in, like, the Bible, so these are Muslim houses.’ Okay. Theology isn’t the Dawgs’ forte, and only one boy suggests that Serbs may have lived here. ‘What little I know of the Muslim religion,’ a sergeant who’s been to college says, ‘is Jesus Christ is not the savior to end all saviors. So the cross isn’t anything significant to the Muslim religion.’ ‘Tha’s jus’ like the Jehovah Witnesses,’ says Sergeant Cooper, warming himself and his morning coffee at these roaring flames. ‘They’re sayin’ Jesus Christ is not the savior. Jehovah is.’ ‘The same thing about the Catholics,’ another sergeant says. ‘A lot of the Catholics don’ believe in Jesus Christ. My mom has a lot of ... Excuse me,’ the sergeant says. ‘Not Catholic. Jewish.’ (Sack, 1997, pp.4-5)

And in another scene, two soldiers worrying over the ubiquitous minefields in Bosnia nevertheless seem to believe they are headed for *Serbia*:

‘I heard,” he continues, ‘that the Cro – ‘ He pauses. ‘Let’s see, you got Bosnian Serbs, you got Muslim Serbs, you got, uh, Croat Serbs – ‘ He pauses again. ‘Or whatever. Well, one of `em is actually markin’ the minefields and disassemblin’ `em. That’s what I heard.’ (Sack, 1997, p.1)

In yet another, the Dawg's Sergeant Cooper tries to reassure his men when they first encounter the Serbs in the ruins of Ulice.

Does anyone live here? On cold days in hell, presumably. But now the Dawgs see a couple of men go by. They're wearing wool caps and carrying rifles, loaded ones, for in the hard-edged moonlight the Dawgs see the magazines jut out. Sergeant Cooper, the Dawgs' keeper, tells them the men are Serbs, are soldiers protecting their land from the two other clans, but (let's admit it) the Dawgs are scared, in their hands are rifles but on the Army's orders the magazines are in their pockets, safe from the wild impulses of all Private Rileys. Wanting to reassure his men, Cooper says, 'He,' meaning any Serb, 'has gotta be outta his God-lovin' absolu' mind...' 'Allah,' someone intones, mocking the Serbs' religion, confusing the Serbs with the Muslims. (Sack, 1997, pp.3-4)

But the Dawgs, ignorant of the true history of this place, soon become friendly with the Serbs, taking souvenir pictures and sharing cigarettes. In the following scene, a Serb named Goran relates what he claims to be the story of Ulice.

Day after day, the Serbs in half civvies, half camouflage clothes (like Vietnam veterans, like Iraqi soldiers surrendering) stroll by the Dawgs' tent. Often the Dawgs ask, 'What happened here?' and with reluctance the Serbs tell the Dawgs the woeful story of Ulice. They tell it in German, a Serb soldier sliding his finger across his throat and saying, 'Ich bin ein Soldat,' he's a soldier and not someone who slashes civilians, throats. They tell it in Basic English, the Serb who seems sixty (a man with a salt-and-pepper beard) saying, 'Serbs have ... Serbs have ...' 'Been here?' a sergeant suggests. 'Always,' the Serb concludes. They tell it in complete sentences, the Serb whose name is Goran saying, 'In all houses were Serbs.' No one the Serbs ever speak to (not even the intelligence officer who once said, 'Hey, Serbs are it' and blamed the whole bloody war on Serbia's president, Milosevic, and now is sorry he did so) doubts the Serbs' sincerity. And what the Serbs report is, Ulice was a Serb village, its people were Serbs. In April 1992, the Croats attacked and took it, in May the Muslims attacked and took it, and in December the Serbs retook what little was left of it. 'We found lots of children and women, uh ...' says Goran, fishing for the English word. 'Killed.' 'They killed the Serb women and children,' an American captain laments. 'It was ch-chate,' says Goran unhappily. 'Hate?' the American asks. 'Yes,' says Goran. 'It was ch-hate.' (Sack, 1997, p.6)

But as Sack reports, the Serbs may not be as innocent as they appear. In the following scene, a newly arrived American newsman seems to know more about Ulice than the soldiers who have now been here for months.

The people of Ulice (if any survived) don't return, but to the north appear hundreds of Serbs with bricks and boards and - for the windows - rolls of gray plastic to try to restore the ruins there. Like surgeons, the Serbs wear baby-blue smocks as they mortar, hammer,

and glaze and stare at the Dawgs patrolling nearby. Three times a day the Dawgs patrol, and as the weather gets better, the Dawgs are often accompanied by American, British, French, Swiss, or Scandinavian camera crews. One day the crew is from CBS, the cameraman taping the Dawgs as they call out to Serbs, 'Zdravo!' meaning 'Hello!' and 'Kako ste?' meaning 'How are you?' The correspondent, Bob Simon, is walking beside the Dawgs' lieutenant and, like him, is wearing a microphone as he asks an impolitic question. 'Now these' says Simon, pointing to the baby-blue-coated men, 'are Serbs moving into the Croat and Muslim houses, right?' The lieutenant pauses. His face seems a half shade yellower. His latest intelligence says that Simon is right: that when the war started in April 1992, this area was full of Croats and Muslims and that the men with hammers today are Serbs, Serbs in clear violation of the peace treaty signed by Milosevic in Ohio. The lieutenant, though, doesn't want to compromise his conscientious neutrality by telling the ten million viewers of The CBS Evening News (or even the Dawgs) that these mischief-makers are Serbs and, after his anxious pause, says, 'I can't say with 100 percent certainty they are Serbs.' 'Right,' says Simon, inferring that the lieutenant might want to make captain someday. (Sack, 1997, p.8)

In another scene, the Dawgs get a firsthand look at the intensity of the Serbs' ethnic animosity.

One spring morning a very tall man, a Croat, drives his red Yugo past the Dawgs and into Serb territory. To look at or listen to, the man could be a Serb (well, nearly: a Serb says potayto, a Croat potahto - a Serb says krompeer and a Croat kroompeer), but the Serbs who sit drinking slivovitz outside the Zora grocery see from the Roman letters on the man's license plate that he's a Croat. And maybe the Croats were the villains in Ulice, for the Serbs lose their tempers, surround the car, and cry, 'Kill him!' and 'Burn him!' and a Serb cop - the Serb soldiers are gone - a cop in violet camouflage throws the man to the ground and starts beating him. 'Who let you come here?' the cop demands, and when the Croat says the Americans did - the Dawgs did - the cop pulls his pistol out and shouts, 'I'm going to slaughter you and I'm going to slaughter them!' (Sack, 1997, p.8)

The young soldier who helped save the man, Private Daniel Riley, is later invited to dine with the visiting Secretary of Defense as part of a publicity event. Riley, a hard-charging soldier who wants to do right by the people of Bosnia, is nevertheless confused about his role here.

In seconds Riley (and one lucky woman private) is shaking hands with a general, admiral, congressman, congresswoman, a man in a bomber jacket who you better believe is the secretary of defense, and (for a PFC) the most formidable person of all: the sergeant major. 'How you doin'?' the old sergeant says to Riley. 'You got any questions for the secretary?' Oh, boy, does Riley ever! He sits down (you'll see him on CBS, NBC, and ABC) on the secretary's immediate left. As he and the brass eat a vegetarian quiche with willowy plastic forks, the words of his question assemble in Riley's mind. On the Dawgs' bulletin board (by 'Venomous Snakes of the Former Yugoslavia') is a poster entitled 'Indicted for War Crimes,' and Riley has noticed that 90 percent of the wanted men are Serbs. One, who's

wanted for beating the Croats and Muslims with sticks, shovels, and lead-weighted clubs at a concentration camp near Ulice, then shooting them, is someone who Riley believes he caught one day. The man had a hand grenade, but Riley was told to release him, grenade and all - well, really, was Riley the meanest dog?. He wasn't even Rin Tin Tin, and at the appropriate moment he swallows his green-pepper quiche and says, 'Mr. Secretary. Yesterday you were in Sarajevo, and you finalized an agreement to furnish the Croats and Muslims weapons. Why... ' 'Well, let me correct you,' the secretary begins, and Riley never quite asks him why, if he helps the Croats and Muslims, the Dawgs can't help them, too. (Sack, 1997, p.9)

But in another scene, the Dawgs begin to realize that they might first need to help themselves. Indeed, some of the young soldiers are almost killed investigating mysterious explosions that have destroyed newly rebuilt Muslim homes nearby.

South of the Dawgs the Muslims are also restoring ruins. All summer the Muslims hammer, but one thing distinguishes their homes from those of the Serbs to the Dawgs' north: Often the Muslim homes explode. It might be midnight when boom! a boy who's standing guard on some wobbling ruins sees, to the south, a bright white light, then another, another, he gets on the radio but the Dawgs are already out of their bags, putting on bulletproof vests, asking, 'What the fuck was that?' In the darkness, the Dawgs walk south to learn that it's Muslim homes, the roofs drooping down, the rafters sprawling like pickup sticks, the smell of plastic explosives lining the Dangs, noses like drugs. No one is ever hurt in these eerie explosions, but one night two Dawgs almost die. A corporal and sergeant, the two have walked down the road the bombers apparently fled on, have crossed an old bridge that sags like a trampoline under them, have shone a flashlight this way, that, and now are re-crossing the weary bridge when 'Shit!' the corporal suddenly cries. At one loose board he sees two wires, one yellow, one blue, and he seizes the sergeant's shoulder before the sergeant steps on the board and the ten pounds of plastic beneath it. 'Stay where you're at!' the sergeant now shouts to the Dawgs. 'The bridge is mined!' 'How the fuck could it be mined,' cries Cooper, 'n you on the other side?' 'I don't know! But they must've known we'd come after 'em! And they tried to kill us!' (Sack, 1997, pp.9-10)

Finally, confused and frustrated that none of the expected 10,000 people show up to participate in the Dayton Accords-mandated elections, Sack endeavors to find the truth about Ulice. Doing what the Dawgs can not, he leaves and travels throughout the Balkans tracking down and interviewing the few survivors of the village. In the following passage, Sack reveals what he finds to be the true history of Ulice.

Ulice wasn't full of Serbs when the war erupted in April 1992. The census said that seven of every eight people here were Croats. Confirming this even now are the ruins of Ulice's only church - a Catholic one - its Catholic cemetery, and even its poker hall, whose faded

sign says POKAR in the Croatian alphabet, not NOKAP in the Serbian one. True, there also were Serbs here, friends of the Croats who called at the Croats' homes, drank coffee, stared at the grounds, and told the Croats their futures ('I see a gun, you'll be getting good news') but by Friday, May 8, these Serbs were gone. They weren't dead, they'd simply left, for they knew what would happen that day. At ten in the morning some Serbs (some soldiers from Bosnia and Serbia, the country run by Milosevic) attacked. Not having explosives, the Croats tried to saw down the bridge to Ulice, they failed and the Serbs rolled in. Ulice then was a picture postcard place, the homes were like those in the Tirol, the walls were stucco, the balusters of the balconies hand-carved wood. At 10:00 a.m., the Croat men (the women and children, worried, had left in April) were having coffee and cepap at the Cafe Zagi, but they fled when the Serbs came in twenty tanks, firing their cannons into the picturesque homes. In the turrets the Serbs stood and shouted, 'We're Serbs! We're invincible! You can't do anything to us! You don't have soldiers! You don't have tanks! Ulice is ours!' At once, the Serb soldiers moved into Ulice and into the hundreds of Croat and Muslim towns near it. They lived in the ruins after putting up plastic windows, sat on old filters from army trucks, ate off the coffee tables, drank all the Johnnie Walker. On the walls the Serbs put graffiti like the hanging woman and [unknown text], four c's, the abbreviation in Serbian for 'Only unity saves the Serbs,' the slogan of Greater Serbia. When peace came to Bosnia, the Serbs looted all the wires, pipes, and (even as Dawgs looked on, uncomprehending) terra-cotta roofs, then the Serb soldiers withdrew. One reason was, the Dawgs were here now, the *Dawgs were doing the dirty work, were keeping the Croats and Muslims off the one half of Bosnia the Serbs had seized - the Dawgs were the Serbs' defensive team* [emphasis mine]. In place of these soldiers came the Serb cops. They beat up Croats and Muslims (including those who'd fought for the Serbs) who tried to return to their homes, and they let Serbs, only Serbs, rebuild them as Dawgs waved and said g'day. By day the cops stopped at the Dawgs' tents to smoke, put ashes in Dixie cups, and watch videos like Born on the Fourth of July. At night the cops slipped by the Dawgs, put plastic explosives in Muslim houses, detonated them, broke into the mayor's house, tried to kill him, put plastic in the sagging bridge, tried to kill the Dawgs, and ran (the Dawgs didn't spot them, but a boy in another platoon did and, by radio, asked to shoot them: the answer was no) - ran to Serb territory. On election day, the Serbs used ballots in the Serb alphabet, listed the candidates who were Serbs, and let the Croats and Muslims know: They were tempting fate if they sought to vote in their former towns in the Serb Republic. Some of the Croats and Muslims didn't vote, some voted elsewhere, and some voted absentee as Dawgs stood at sandbags and said, 'I wish someone would come. It's fuckin, borin'.' (Sack, 1997, pp.11-12)

But it is not just the Serbs who draw Sack's ire. Indeed, as with much of his earlier literary war journalism, Sack takes the United States and its people to task for committing its young men to what he feels are dubious missions overseas.

The Dawgs were doing their duty. Unhappy to leave their wives and children, scared of the mines and the snipers, they'd come to Ulice because America asked them to. That is what soldiers everywhere (even the Serbs) take pride in, to do for their country whatever they're asked. Ask them to charge at Balaclava, the Marne, or My Lai, they'll tell you, 'Hooah!'

Tell them in 1941 that Germans are bad and French are good and to beat the Germans and free the French, well, roger wilco, will comply! But tell them the Germans and French have killed each other for six hundred years and to keep those loonies from each other's throats - well they'll do that, too. And fifty years later the Nazis will still be in Paris. The Dawgs are honorable men, but (just as we did to their fathers, in Vietnam) we sent them on a less than honorable mission. Yes, Croats and Muslims aren't without their sins, but the people who started (and still haven't stopped) this war are Serbs, and the only honorable attitude is Private, now PFC, Riley's, that reincarnation of GI Joe, that soldier who wants a Combat Badge. Platoon! Attention! Daaawwg Poouund! Guys, America loves you but we betrayed you - we told you to aid and comfort the baddies, and, being good soldiers, you did. (Sack, 1997, pp. 12-13)

### **Conclusion**

Several frames emerge from Sack's narrative about American soldiers in Bosnia. The first can be termed the "**Ignorant American Soldier**," ignorance defined as knowing very little of the situation, people or history of the region into which they have been ordered. The Dawgs do not know what defines a Serb, Croat or Muslim, especially their religious differences. Conversely, however, the Dawgs are portrayed as "**Good Soldiers**" because they are shown to be faithful in the carrying out of their duty—even if it means inadvertently aiding the perpetrators of the Ulice tragedy. Ask them to do a job, Sack intones, and America's soldiers will respond.

Another frame is that of "**Villainous Serbs – Victimized Croats/Muslims**." The Serbs are portrayed as violent, cruel and deceitful, while Croats and Muslims are shown to be nothing more than their innocent and hapless victims. Other than the sentence, "Croats and Muslims aren't without their sins," little attention is paid to the atrocities committed by both groups. Indeed, if the Croats are accused of committing similar crimes to those of the Serbs, Sack suggests it can be attributed to Serbian President Milosevic's inflammatory propaganda alone. Meanwhile, Sack takes pains to enumerate Serbian sins because they are the "people who started (and still haven't stopped) this war."

Finally, a master frame emerges: the “**Dishonorable Mission.**” The leadership’s insistence on neutrality inadvertently positioned the Dawgs as the allies of the true enemy. Judging by Sack’s final sentences above, the only honorable mission would be to defeat the Serbs militarily.

## CHAPTER 9 ANACONDA

### **Background**

On the morning of September 11, 2001, members of an Islamist terror group known as al-Qaeda hijacked four American commercial jetliners, crashing two of them into the World Trade Centers in New York City and one into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The fourth, United Flight 93, crashed into an open field in Pennsylvania after passengers, learning from cell phone conversations the fate of the other planes, rose up and tried to reclaim the aircraft. It was later determined that Flight 93's target was the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. More than 3,000 people perished in the attacks, almost all of them American civilians. U.S. President George Bush vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice (The 9/11 Commission Report, 2004).

The search for those responsible soon focused on Afghanistan, a war-ravaged country in South Asia mostly under the control of an Islamist regime known as the Taliban, or "the students." The Taliban, which had grown out of a decades-long struggle first against the Soviet Union and later the civil war following the Soviet departure in 1989, was intent on enforcing what it considered a strict adherence to Islamic Sharia law. Most tenets of modernity were rejected, and such punishments as stoning and beheading were commonplace. Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was believed to be hiding in the country under the protection of Taliban leader Mullah Omar (Coll, 2004; Griffiths, 1981).

In an address to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, President Bush issued an ultimatum demanding the Taliban turn over bin Laden and his lieutenants, close any terrorist training facilities, or face the consequences. When the Taliban refused, the United States and ally Great Britain began preparations to overthrow the Islamists and kill or capture bin Laden and other members of al-Qaeda (The 9/11 Commission Report, 2004).

The first of these preparations involved the covert insertion of so-called “jawbreaker” CIA teams into Afghanistan. The teams, armed with linguists, special weapons training, and millions in American dollars, were sent to link up with indigenous Afghan fighters—most notably, the Northern Alliance—who were opposed to the Taliban and bin Laden. On October 7, 2001 the U.S. military launched Operation Enduring Freedom, a combination of allied air power, CIA paramilitary, Special Forces and indigenous Afghan fighters. The Taliban and supporting al-Qaeda forces were quickly routed, with the capital city of Kabul falling into allied hands on November 13. The writing on the wall, bin Laden and his supporters fled east toward the country’s rugged and mountainous border with Pakistan and the cave complex known as Tora Bora (Bernsten & Pezzullo, 2005).

CIA operative and jawbreaker team leader Gary Bernsten claims he had located likely al-Qaeda forces at Tora Bora—including bin Laden himself—but that his calls for the insertion of 800 U.S. Army Rangers to seal off bin Laden’s escape into Pakistan went unheeded. U.S. Central Command, asserts Bernsten, was reluctant to commit U.S. troops for fear of sustaining high casualties. U.S. officials argue that, given the extreme altitude, size and ruggedness of the terrain, the introduction of U.S. ground troops would still not guarantee success. Instead, U.S. commanders continued to rely on its tribal allies and their intimate knowledge of the region to block the mountain passes. But many had lost their motivation after the Taliban’s defeat. At least one account claims that bin Laden brokered a deal with tribal Afghans allowing him and his men to escape (Bernsten & Pezzullo, 2005; Scheuer, 2004).

Seeking to avoid the same mistake, U.S. and allied ground forces in March 2002 moved into the Shah-i-Kot Valley in east-central Afghanistan in pursuit of al-Qaeda and Taliban forces operating there. It was also believed that bin Laden and Mullah Omar were among them. The

attack, codenamed Anaconda, was to be a classic “hammer and anvil” operation, with some U.S. forces taking up blocking positions—the anvil—against which other units would find, fix and destroy the enemy. Allied planners underestimated the size and disposition of enemy forces, however. Instead of the 200 or so ragtag remnants of Tora Bora, they found instead perhaps as many as 1,000 hardened, well supplied fighters dug into the high mountainous terrain. While technically a success—U.S. and Afghan forces managed to kill substantial numbers of Taliban and al-Qaeda and reclaim the valley—U.S. forces suffered 80 casualties, including eight dead. Anaconda also illuminated the extreme difficulty in conducting high-altitude operations against an experienced and determined enemy. Worst of all, Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants, thought to be in the valley, were not killed or captured (Naylor, 2004).

Two of the American units ordered into Shah-i-Kot were the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 87 Regiment and the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 31<sup>st</sup> Regiment, both of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division out of Fort Drum, New York. And, just as he had done since Korea, John Sack would be there as well, at 71 likely the oldest war correspondent in Afghanistan. Once again writing for *Esquire*, Sack’s plan was to accompany the men of the 10<sup>th</sup> into combat and help chronicle America’s first war of the new millenium. While waiting in the Persian Gulf country of Bahrain for clearance to go to Afghanistan, Sack was asked why he wanted to return to war. “It’s a feeling that I belong there, a feeling I know how to do this” (Murphy, 2001).

Published in the August 2002 issue of *Esquire*, “Operation Anaconda” tells the story of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division’s young soldiers as they struggled to overcome the harsh conditions of eastern Afghanistan—and the fear of the unknown. But despite the challenges, Sack’s soldiers never lose sight of their objective—avenging the attacks of September 11.

## Analysis

A powerful frame running through Sack's narrative is the difficulty of the fight in the Shah-i-Kot. Sack takes great pains to emphasize the harsh terrain, the confusion and frustration among American soldiers, and the maddening elusiveness and seeming omnipotence of al-Qaeda fighters. In the following scene, Sack describes the chaos as even the best-laid plans of the U.S. Army quickly go awry when Company C, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion is airlifted in to take on the "Qaedas."

It's chilly outside. The helicopters take off. The plan is, up in the mountains are hundreds of Qaedas who our Afghan allies should rout and who the Americans should subsequently ambush. But the first casualty of any war is the Plan. In seconds, a boy in Rivera's platoon cries, 'I see somebody.' He then cries, 'He's wearing black,' and Rivera, using binoculars, says, 'Oh, I see somebody, too,' a Qaeda, a scared civilian, an anthropomorphic oryx-- what? running from left to right forty meters away. Shoot him, is that what these soldiers should do? No one has answered when the black-wearing apparition drops into a little hollow and ffft! ffft! starts shooting at the soldiers themselves. Let's light his ass up, Rivera thinks, but as soon as the whole platoon and ('Hooah!' the jubilant soldiers cry) two Apache helicopters, two cannon-shooting, rocket-shooting, missile-shooting helicopters, try to light it, boom, near the platoon there falls a rocket-propelled grenade. One, two, three kilometers away, high on a snow-sided mountain, unpurged by our Afghan allies, a Qaeda (a man who's invisible but by inference is Qaeda) has shouldered something like a bazooka, and the foot-long grenade inside it has fallen close to Rivera's wards. And within minutes from the same unassailable mountain there comes a mortar round, boom, and Rivera hears someone cry, 'Doc! Doc! Doc!' (Sack, 2002, pp.4-5)

Later, the soldiers of Company C still hopelessly pinned down, Sack simultaneously demonstrates the seeming invincibility of the Qaedas in their mountain redoubt--and the impotency of American technology to dislodge them.

Boooooom! It's the Air Force, thank God, but all the American soldiers recoil as a cargo plane metamorphosed into a bomber drops one of its one-ton bombs on the mountain that all this affliction comes from, on the cloud-covered heads of the Qaedas. As anyone would, as soon as the Qaedas hear those horrific bombers approaching, they go with lock, stock, and barrel (rifles, launchers, and mortars) into their caves, go, if they technologically could, into the fourth dimension until the bombers depart. Then boooooom! The soldiers cringe, the bombers conclude, the Qaedas, unchastened, undismayed, come from their caves, their rifles, launchers, and mortars coming, too, and 'Incoming!' the soldiers shout. To shield him, Rivera lies on top of McGovern, the boy with wounded feet, legs, arms, the boy benumbed by Nubain, he puts his head on McGovern's and hears him say, 'Please please please.' Then boom, a mortar round hits First Lieutenant Maroyka. Then ffft, a bullet hits Specialist Almey, a boy who played basketball with Rivera, shooting, shooting

the ball like some repetitive plastic toy. Then boom, a mortar round hits Major Byrne, the doctor far from a MASH and, with Rivera, the last intact practitioner here. Then boom, another mortar round hits the battalion medic, this one from two feet away. (Sack, 2002, pp.9-10)

Later that night, as Company C's multiple wounded lie in wait for the helicopters that can take them to safety, Sack again demonstrates that it is the Qaedas who control this mountain—despite the technological prowess of U.S. forces.

'THE NIGHT BELONGS TO US,' the American Army says. American soldiers have NODs, night optical devices, the world around them as bright as twilight although it's a worrisome bilious green, and the Qaedas don't have them, not yet. Tonight what the Qaedas can see are the flash, flash, lightning flash of America's bombs, but not America's infrared lights, lights in a druid circle, lights the American soldiers meticulously laid out. The lights encircle the LZ, landing zone, for the medevacs, if the medevacs actually come and if, by tomorrow, the casualties will be en route to Frankfurt or Washington, D. C. And lo! at eleven o'clock appear a couple of angelic medevacs that the Qaedas, unable to see, apparently hear. The Qaedas launch a Stinger missile, mad to avoid it, the medevacs disappear again, none of Rivera's patients aboard. 'I can't believe this,' says Rivera, though not to his anxious patients. 'They,' the Qaedas, 'aren't gonna let us leave! At dawn they're gonna be shootin' again!' (Sack, 2002, p.12)

After Company C is finally evacuated, Company B is airlifted in the next day in hopes of having more success. The Qaedas, however, have abandoned the mountain, so Company B goes in search of them. And as they approach yet another hill, it is not long before the soldiers of B come under attack as well.

On top of the hill, surprise--the Qaedas rematerialize, the Qaedas start shooting at the startled platoon from God knows where. And ffft! ffft! from somewhere below the Americans come the Qaedas' bullets, then boom: boom? come the Qaedas' notorious mortar rounds. The first of them falls where the soldiers just were, Mahmuti thinking, Holy shit! We could've been dead? On the bill top, most soldiers look for the Qaedas, shouting, 'I don't see 'em,' but some soldiers in this sudden baptism of fire just cower behind boulders, among them the soldier who in the Adirondacks asked Mahmuti, 'You know what side you're on?' (Sack, 2002, p.18)

Returning to an earlier theme in his war journalism, Sack again displays his disdain for the Army's focus on what he believes to be useless ritual, even suggesting it may be partly to

blame for the soldiers' difficulties. In the following scene, two privates from a Company A, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion platoon nicknamed the "Misfits," are confronted with a troubling revelation.

The two didn't know it, but precious little of basic training would stand them in stead in Afghanistan. Saluting? Marching? Using their hands reciprocally, all in the service of Right shoulder arms? More folderol for Port arms and Port arms salute? What they would do in Afghanistan Simmons and Starlin didn't learn in Georgia: running into icicle-sided caves where maybe, maybe, would be Osama, firing their rifles automatically, firing their machine guns, and throwing their hand grenades like Bata pitching machines. From Georgia they went to Kuwait, another training place for the 10th Mountain Division. There they learned to eschew all Kuwaiti women. They learned to stand aside of Kuwaiti prayer rugs. Their shoe soles they learned to expose to no Kuwaiti. (Sack, 2002, pp.23-24)

In contrast, the Qaedas must have done the "right" kind of training, according to Sack. In the following scene, American soldiers discover an enemy cave containing information about the Qaedas' training regimen.

At their camps in Afghanistan, at 6:00 every morning, the Qaedas did exercises, averaging thirty push-ups, thirty sit ups. All morning the Qaedas studied weapons, using, in English and Arabic, Dari, Pashto, Tajik, Urdu, and Uzbek translations, manuals from the American Army, Marines, and Special Forces and even articles from American hunting magazines. In the afternoon the Qaedas studied the Koran. They weren't taught Right shoulder arms, but to A, B, and C's common question of 'Why were they such fierce enemies?' the Misfits found a troublesome answer. It simply is this: 'They were good soldiers.' (Sack, 2002, p.28)

In the following scene, Sack demonstrates the difficulty faced by Simmons and Starlin (both named Andrew), and the rest of Company A as they attempt to dislodge the Qaedas from yet another of their mountain redoubts.

The soldiers are in the Qaedas' often-visited valley. To the east is the Qaedas' notorious mountain, and to the west is a humpbacked one the Americans call the Whale. It's there that Simmons and Starlin (and all the Misfits) deploy. Their helmets, Interceptor, rucksacks on, their rifles carried like quarterstaves, the two tenderfoots (in army argot, crispy critters) start up the whale's precipitous side. Like marbles, the pebbles skid downward and the two critters skid with them like Jack and Jill, first on their boots, then on their seats, then stoutly stand up and retrace their route. If rucksacks were boulders, theirs would be the legend of Sisyphus, the top of the Whale two miles away whatever they do. And two miles high, the Andrews breathe hard, as if, to get into shape, they sat on couches operating remote controls. (Sack, 2002, p.25)

And the difficulties for A do not end once it reaches the top. Indeed, confusion reigns supreme as the young soldiers encounter the Qaeda's complex system of caves.

Simmons's sergeant passes a cave that a Qaeda could at any moment storm out of, his Russian rifle smoking. 'A cave! Get back!' cries Simmons's sergeant. 'Frag out!' the sergeant continues, tossing a hand grenade--boom!--and the cave anorexically collapses. 'It just caved in! oh, fuck!' cries Simmons's sergeant, seeing, on a boulder above him, a Qaeda, a man in green camouflage and, on his shoulders, a yellow blanket--bang, and the sergeant shoots him. 'I got one!' He sees another blanketed being--bang!' I got another!' He sees still another--bang! 'I got three!' Chaos is king. Dead, dead, dead at Simmons's feet are one yellow-blanketed donkey and two Qaedas, none of whom is Osama. Farther away is a Qaeda who Simmons, bang bang bang! keeps firing at but who escapes behind a boulder, and in the ground is a quite provocative hole that Simmons drops a hand grenade into, a hand grenade that falls, falls, like Alice in Wonderland and, in time, emits a chthonian bing. Such is the Great Osama Hunt for Andrew number one. (Sack, 2002, p.25)

Meanwhile, Starlin's squad is engaged in its own frustrating search.

Still downhill is Starlin's squad. It sees another cave on the whale's side. The Misfits conclude it's a man-made bunker: three walls of interlocked rocks, the fourth wall the Whale, the roof perhaps plywood and, on top of that, more rocks. The question is, Where's the doorway that (at any moment) the Qaedas with Russian rifles might hurtle out of? Starlin's squad searches for it. In the interlocked rocks it sees some interstices for the Qaedas' rifles, and Starlin tosses a hand grenade expectantly into one. He cries, 'Frag out!' and runs up the Whale--bang!--and runs downhill to another interstice to toss another grenade in. Uphill, downhill, uphill, he's on a crazy gymnastics machine at an altitude twice that of Denver. He's winded. He breathes like a dog whose tongue's hanging out, huh huh, huh huh. At last Starlin finds the Qaedas' perilous doorway. Into it Starlin's sergeant throws another grenade--bang!--and tells him, 'Go in!' 'I'll lead with lead!' The first lead rhymes with deed, the second rhymes with dead. 'Go for it!' And through the doorway goes Starlin, shooting, apparently, at a Qaeda: a Qaeda's chest, a Qaeda's shirt, well, that's what the target appears to be. In comes Starlin's sergeant, shooting (shooting a shotgun) at the same man, and another sergeant shoots, too. Oh, Lord have mercy! Not falling down, the man keeps moving as Starlin and the two sergeants shoot. The smoke from Starlin's gun, the other gun, the shotgun, the crumbled rock, and, who knows? from the Qaeda is so thick it might be an hour past midnight. No one sees anything, but on Starlin's rifle, attached with duct tape, is a small flashlight, and Starlin cuts through the darkness with it. The little that's left of the target, which, it develops, is hanging by rope from the ceiling, might have been a T-shirt, blanket, sandbag, or Pillsbury flour bag but by no flight of anyone's fancy was ever a Qaeda. Damn, Starlin thinks. All today, the Misfits blow up caves, bunkers, holes on the Whale. No more Qaedas and no Osamas do any soldiers kill, capture, or let escape accidentally today. 'It would be crazy, wouldn't it,' one of the Misfits asks Starlin, 'if we really found him? Found Osama?' 'It would be crazy.' (Sack, 2002, pp.26-27)

Indeed, despite the daunting challenges presented by both their enemy and the terrain, avenging the September 11 attacks remains a powerful motivator for the soldiers of Sack's narrative. In the following passage, Army medic Rivera, part of the pinned down Company C in the opening scene, invokes the memory of the attacks to help him endure the situation.

Whatever I have, I'm about to lose it, Rivera thinks. What am I even doing here? And then Rivera remembers the World Trade Center. Remembers the flaring fires like Zeus' lightning bolts. Remembers the businessmen (My God! How desperate were they?)-- businessmen and businesswomen throwing themselves to the plaza, eighty floors below. The towers collapsing, the ashes supplanting them, the ash-plastered people running away. The people doing the rounds of the hospitals, asking, 'Did you see this man?' 'Did you see this woman?' And hearing repeatedly, 'No, I've not.' And never discovering them. And never burying them. It's not two platoons, it's not sixty people the mourners sought, thinks Rivera. It's three thousand people! As bad as Anaconda is, Rivera thinks, We're better off. We'll never ask, 'Did you see my mom?' 'Did you see my dad?' 'Did you see Krystal?' He thinks of the wife who must have asked, 'Did you see Steve?' Steve was the paramedic at a Harlem station in New York City who, after medic school in Texas, Rivera did six weeks of training with. 'Do you want to do an IV?' 'Do you want to do an EKG?' Do you want to, Steve always asked, and Rivera always said yes. Now, Rivera has heard that on Tuesday, September 11, the North Tower collapsed on Steve, the deed of the organization on the mountain in Rivera's plain sight. And now Rivera remembers why he's here. It's for the three thousand dead. It's for their bereaved, to let them know they're avenged. It's for the heroic paramedic at the Harlem station, Rivera apostrophizing him, 'It's for you. We're gettin' 'em for you, Steve.' (Sack, 2002, pp.10-11)

In another scene, Company B, listening on the radio as their sister company is pinned down, begs their commanding officer to let them go to their aid.

All day, B sat entreating its lieutenants, 'We gotta help 'em! We gotta join 'em!' One lieutenant had a friend who'd died at his desk at Cantor Fitzgerald, a desk in the airplane's flaming path in the north tower of the World Trade Center. On each of his hand grenades, the lieutenant (a former broker, too) had written his friend's five-syllable name-- STERGIOPOULUS--with a Magic Marker, and B entreated him, 'Please! Just get us a Chinook!' 'No, the LZ's too hot.' 'Then land the Chinook five miles away! We'll walk in!' 'No ...' (Sack, 2002, pp.14-15)

One of B's soldiers was Mahmuti, a Muslim-American who had witnessed the attacks from his apartment in New Jersey. Despite the religious confliction, Mahmuti has no qualms about joining the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain and fighting fellow Muslims.

The 10th Mountain Division at its frantic camp near the Adirondacks, frantic due to his sergeant's announcements of 'Here's your packin' list!' 'Here's your malaria pill!' 'Here's your orders!' 'We're leavin' tomorrow!' Were leaving to Asia, leaving to fight the-- Muslims. One fellow soldier asked him, 'You know what side you're on?' 'Yeah. I know what side I'm on.' It wasn't the Muslim side, Mahmuti sincerely believed. He believed he could aim, fire, and kill a Muslim even if, as he also believed, the Muslim would go to paradise while all Mahmuti's fellow soldiers went to Muslim hell. (Sack, 2002, p.16)

Mahmuti's lieutenant had his own September 11-related motivations for coming to Afghanistan. Here, he tries to encourage B before they are to airlift into combat against the Qaedas.

'My best friend died at someone's hand. He didn't deserve it, and his family didn't deserve it. We're in Afghanstan for him and for others like him. We're here to deliver justice to those who did it. You soldiers should be proud you're taking part in it. I know I am,' the wet-eyed lieutenant, whose name is a Czech one, Blaha, said. His soldiers' eyes were also wet, and no one called him Lieutenant Blah-Blah. (Sack, 2002, p. 17)

Finally, Mahmuti meets a suspected Qaeda his fellow Americans have taken prisoner.

Although he treats him humanely, Mahmuti's meeting with a fellow Muslim reinforces his belief that he has done the right thing in Afghanistan.

By accident, Mahmuti in his combat boots steps on the Qaeda's bare foot and tells him, 'My bad.' 'Water.' 'You're sayin' water?' 'Yes yes.' 'You're speakin' English?' 'Yes yes.' Mahmuti takes off the outlandish sandbag, and the Qaeda starts crying. Man, thinks Mahmuti, I'm not gonna kill you. But, thinks Mahmuti, what if you weren't the prisoner and I was? My shirt says Mahmuti, my dog tags say Islam, my pocket carries the Koran. You'd call me a Muslim traitor. You'd say, 'So you're against the jihad!' You wouldn't just kill me. You'd torture me. Not reciprocating at all, Mahmuti gives the man water, socks, blankets, and asks him, 'What's your name?' 'Mehmed Tadik.' At home, thinks Mahmuti, I've got a Muslim friend named Tadik. 'You're a Muslim?' 'Yes yes.' 'I am a Muslim, too.' He's mocking me, the Qaeda quite clearly thinks. His teeth start to grind as if they're chewing betel nuts. 'You Shiite or Sunni?' 'Sunni. How about you?' 'I Sunni.' But still the Qaeda looks skeptical, looks to Mahmuti as though, if he weren't handcuffed, he'd kill him. Mahmuti assures him he's Muslim. He says the Arabic prayer 'Bismillah e Errahman e Erraheem'—'In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.' Again the Qaeda starts crying and, in English this time, Mahmuti asks him, 'Are you Al Qaeda?' 'No no! I student Kabul University!' 'You're lying.' 'No no! I no Al Qaeda! I peace!' 'Are you haram?' 'No no!' The word means sinful. 'You are haram. You aren't Muslim. We're pure, we Muslims. We don't go killing innocent people like in New York. That shit, we Muslims don't do.' 'No no! I no kill! I student!' Mahmuti walks away. He has little love for the Qaeda or the Non-Qaeda. (Sack, 2002, pp.19-21)

## Conclusion

Several frames emerge from Sack's narrative. The first can be labeled the "**Nearly Impossible Fight**," where Sack emphasizes the harsh conditions, rugged terrain, and the elusiveness and seeming invincibility of the "Qaedas." This ties in with a second frame, that of the "**Qaedas as Good Soldiers**." Indeed, the al-Qaeda fighters are portrayed as tough and competent warriors, much more well-suited to their conditions than their American counterparts, and seemingly always in the right place at the right time. Not even the Americans' overwhelming technological advantages can defeat the Qaedas. This frame closely resembles Sack's portrayal of the Vietcong in his Vietnam War journalism.

This frame can be said to relate to a third, a revival of Sack's earlier portrayal of **Army Ritual as Absurd and Meaningless**. Sack intones that nothing the soldiers learned in boot camp will serve them well in Afghanistan and belittles attention to such "useless" rituals as learning right shoulder arms, marching, saluting, etc. By contrast, the Qaedas are framed as being taught exactly and only what they need to succeed in combat, as evidenced by records of their training regimens discovered by U.S. soldiers in the cave bunker.

Yet another frame present is the "**September 11 Attacks as Motivation**." Sack provides several examples of the impact the attacks had on soldiers' lives and their reasons for fighting in Afghanistan. This can be said to relate to what could be described as the narrative's master frame: the "**Perseverant American Soldiers**." Indeed, despite the daunting challenges listed above, the soldiers nevertheless press on, motivated by their desires to avenge the September 11 attacks.

## CHAPTER 10 CONCLUSION

As we have seen, John Sack believed in a literary journalistic approach to covering nonfiction events—especially war. Sack’s narratives contained all of the usual techniques we have come to associate with the genre: storytelling, first/third person voice, dialogue, stream of consciousness, foreshadowing, and so on. But unlike some of his fellow practitioners, Sack did not believe in fictionalizing any portions of the events he covered. He did not invent dialogue, create composite characters, or manufacture scenes. To Sack, fact—discovered through meticulous research and immersion reporting—was always more compelling than fiction. But while he eschewed fictionalizing, Sack whole-heartedly embraced another central tenet of literary journalism: subjectivity. Indeed, Sack believed that objectivity was not only a myth, but those reporters who tried in vain to achieve it actually helped to obscure, rather than reveal, the “truth” of events. Sack had no qualms about interjecting his point of view into his narratives or forming personal relationships with his subjects. Again, he believed such actions enhanced his ability to get to the truth. But *whose* truth is being revealed?

Again, recall Sack’s words when discussing his commitment to subjectivity: “*I’m merely recounting the incidents that are important to me, and recounting them the way I happened to see them. Somebody else, anybody else, could go through the same experience and see it quite differently*” (Schroeder, 1992, p. 20). Of course, this epitomizes the notion of subjectivity, but it also strikes at the heart of what we call “framing,” as well. Recall that framing is the process by which a reporter chooses to emphasize some attributes, while de-emphasizing or excluding others. In this way, consciously or not, reporters are able to “frame facts or events in a particular way, encouraging others to see those facts and events in that same particular way. In this sense,

framing can be understood as taking some aspects of our reality and making them more easily noticed than other aspects” (Kuypers, 2006, p. 7).

This study employed qualitative framing analysis to examine the ways in which Sack framed the events within his war journalism. While we have seen that many frames can be present in a given narrative, this study was concerned only with those said to be “dominant,” in other words, those frames so prevalent and recurrent as to be capable of influencing a reader’s interpretation of events. Several “master frames”—comprised of dominant frames and which encouraged readers to interpret the overall event in a particular way—were also revealed. In examining the dominant and master frames it was discovered that there was a marked difference between Sack’s framing of his Vietnam War coverage and that which followed.

Recall that Sack’s Vietnam War journalism framed American soldiers as reluctant to serve, incompetent, and sometimes even cowardly in the execution of their duty. Those few who were eager to fight, such as Demirgian, were often framed as dysfunctional. U.S. troops were commanded by ruthless officers concerned only with compiling body counts and wreaking destruction. Conversely, their Vietcong enemy was framed as ghostlike in their elusiveness, seemingly invincible and omnipotent in their ability to know just where and when to strike at hapless U.S. troops. Vietnamese civilians were framed first as innocent victims, then as crass profiteers, and finally as the enemy themselves.

Overlaying all this was Sack’s notion of the “Man-Eating Machine,” comprised not only of institutions like the U.S. Army, but the United States and her people, as well. The machine’s sole desire was to eliminate human inefficiency and to impose order on Vietnam by transforming it into a Southeast Asian version of the United States. As Sack intones, it was the imperfect humanity of the Vietnamese that impeded the machine’s progress, thus necessitating their

destruction. The United States' involvement in Vietnam, implied Sack, was a sin for which *all* Americans—including her people back home—should suffer. In the end, the master frame of Sack's Vietnam War journalism could be described as **“The Immorality/Futility of the Vietnam War.”**

Juxtaposed against this was Sack's coverage of American involvement in the Persian Gulf, Bosnia and Afghanistan. While concerning multiple events over a longer period of time, the differences in the way Sack framed these events versus those of Vietnam are startling. In his post-Vietnam journalism, Sack frames U.S. troops as eager and enthusiastic to do their jobs. This time, it is U.S. commanders and policymakers who are framed as reluctant to order their men to fight: the “overly cautious” Captain Burns of Company C; the edict of neutrality in Bosnia, even as it aided the true aggressors; and Company B's reluctant lieutenants in Afghanistan who refused their troop's entreaties to help their comrades.

While not always well-informed about the situations into which they were ordered, the soldiers are nevertheless framed as motivated, sincere and humane in the execution of their duty—regardless of the obstacles. Indeed, an overly-cautious captain and the blinding confusion of war still do not deter the men of Company C in Iraq. The frustration of being assigned a “dishonorable” mission in Bosnia does not dull the troopers' desire to help those who need it. Indeed, as Sack intones, ask American soldiers to do a job, and they will do it, regardless of its relative merit. And, although Sack's coverage of Operation Anaconda is perhaps more similarly framed to that of his Vietnam journalism—the nearly impossible fight, a seemingly invincible enemy, and the Army's disproportionate focus on such “useless” details as marching and saluting—U.S. troops are nevertheless framed as valiant, heroic and perseverant as they seek to

get the job done. Thus, the master frame of Sack's post-Vietnam journalism could be described as "**America's Restrained Yet Willing Soldiers.**"

It takes no great leap of imagination to envision how the events covered by Sack could have been framed differently. Attributes and anecdotes that emphasized American soldiers in Vietnam as heroic, humane, enthusiastic, patriotic, etc. could just as easily have been employed by Sack. The result, of course, would have been a vastly dissimilar framing of the soldiers within his narratives. Likewise, he could have emphasized the myriad ways in which the U.S. government was trying to help the people of Vietnam, from education and healthcare services to the American sacrifices being made to prevent the communist takeover. He could have also featured Vietnamese civilians who were friendly, helpful and grateful toward U.S. troops. And Sack could have emphasized the well-documented intimidation, assassinations and atrocities committed daily by the Vietcong against Vietnamese civilians, as well. All of these attributes were every bit as tangible during the Vietnam War as the ones emphasized by Sack.

Likewise, Sack could have framed the people and events of his post-Vietnam journalism in very different ways, as well. What of Company C's "overly cautious" commander in Iraq? In the confusion of such a mammoth battle, friendly fire incidents were a very real concern. Indeed, fratricide accounted for nearly 20 percent of coalition casualties. Although Sack alludes to this fact a *few* times in the narrative, the number of anecdotes, quotes and personal interjections that served to frame Captain Burns as an almost criminally cautious commander far outweighed information to the contrary. In Bosnia, Sack could have emphasized the very real atrocities committed by the Croats and Muslims there rather than focusing exclusively on the Serbs. Likewise, he might have emphasized *why* U.S. commanders were reluctant to commit troops to combat in the midst of an age-old bloodbath that had already claimed a quarter million lives.

And, Sack could have of course chosen to emphasize the very real success attained at Anaconda. For all their “invincibility” hundreds of al-Qaeda fighters were killed and the remnants driven from the valley, their abandoned cave bunkers yielding intelligence information that continues to help in the Global War on Terrorism (Naylor, 2004).

It seems reasonable to assume that the counter-frames listed above are all as legitimate as those chosen by Sack. So why did he choose to frame events as he did? Any attempt to divine Sack’s motivation would simply be speculation. But what does seem evident, however, is that his subjective approach played a significant role in the way he chose to frame his subjects. Throughout his long career, Sack’s goal had always been to reveal the “truth” through his literary journalism. Indeed, it can be argued that Sack’s work helped bring to light otherwise overlooked aspects and perspectives about the events he covered. But when events are framed to engender a particular interpretation of an issue—at the *exclusion* of equally viable alternatives—it can also be argued that it actually works to *obscure* the truth. So the question again becomes, “*Whose* truth is being revealed?” Put another way, if one were to read only Sack’s journalism about an infantry company in Vietnam, the case of William Calley, Operation Anaconda, and so on, would it stand as a reasonably *accurate* portrayal of those people and events?

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Originally from Montgomery, Alabama, Keith Saliba moved with his mother to Florida when he was just seven years old. He has held a variety of jobs over the years, from construction and restaurant work to surgical technology and newspaper reporting. A graduate of the University of Florida's College of Journalism and Mass Communications, Saliba returned to UF in 2003 to pursue graduate work in mass communication, earning a master's degree in 2005. With the completion of his dissertation in the summer of 2008, Saliba earned a Ph.D. in mass communication. While at UF, Saliba taught a variety of courses, including Writing for Mass Communication; Reporting; Literary Journalism; and, together with mentor William McKeen, Journalism and Pop Culture. Saliba will begin a tenure-track, assistant professorship in journalism at the University of Southern Indiana in August 2008.