

Spring 5-30-2018

Evolutions of the Soldier Hero: Eastwood's American Sniper and the Iraq War

Justin Gillingham
gjustin@bgsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Gillingham, Justin, "Evolutions of the Soldier Hero: Eastwood's American Sniper and the Iraq War" (2018). *Honors Projects*. 334.
<https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects/334>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Evolutions of the Soldier Hero: Eastwood's *American Sniper* and the Iraq War

Justin Gillingham

Honors Project

Submitted to the University Honors Program at Bowling Green State University in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with

University Honors

April 30, 2018

Dr. Brett Holden, Advisor

Dr. Phil Dickinson, Advisor

Consider the following scenario. An American sniper does overwatch in Iraq. He is laying on a rooftop, overlooking a town square as Marines move into it. Suddenly, a woman and a boy step into the street. From here, we are given two alternative versions of the story. The first comes from the opening of Chris Kyle's memoir *American Sniper*. In Kyle's narrative, the woman yanks a grenade from underneath her clothes and arms it. The sniper's platoon chief tells him it is a Chinese grenade and orders him to shoot, but he hesitates, and the chief repeats the order twice more before Kyle takes the shot at her. The grenade drops and, right before it explodes, he shoots again to be certain he has eliminated his target. The sniper says, "It was my duty to shoot, and I don't regret it" (Kyle 3). Kyle presents these events as an authentic documentation of his experiences, published under his own name.

Clint Eastwood presents the second version of the story in his cinematic adaptation of the same title (2014). Eastwood's scene plays out differently than Kyle's representation of the experience. The sniper is on the rooftop, but his platoon chief is not present, only a Marine spotter. The woman steps into the road with a young boy next to her. She hands the child a Russian grenade. The sniper has no other confirmation other than what he sees; no one will support him for shooting civilians if he is mistaken about their intentions. His companion comments on this, telling him that he will go to Leavenworth—a military prison—if he is wrong about his decision to take the shot without a clear and present threat. After hesitating, the sniper watches the boy run towards the Marines and Kyle shoots him. The woman picks up the fallen grenade and goes to throw it; the sniper shoots her as well. The grenade explodes seconds later and all of the Marines jump, startled by the proximity of the blast. The sniper's companion congratulates him in a celebratory tone, but Kyle silences him with a harsh word. He stares at the child's corpse through his scope and appears horrified.

Chris Kyle is the protagonist of Eastwood's film. He is both a real-life individual and a cinematic character. However, it would be a mistake to assume that Chris Kyle as a person is the same as his character in Eastwood's film. It is possible to understand this dual nature for Kyle's character by looking to the cinematic history of war film. For Eastwood, Kyle's character is a construction of not only the many experiences Kyle presents in his memoir, but also of many popular cinematic military personnel that preceded him. In the end, the popular character archetypes of previous generations of military cinema shape how Kyle's character appears in the film. Eastwood adapts the core characteristics of previous archetypes into Kyle, creating a new character type that successfully navigates the Iraq War context. Overall, Eastwood's revisions to Kyle's character participate in a cinematic trend decades in the making. Furthermore, Eastwood's film serves as a substantial addition to the larger genre of Iraq War films, distinguishing itself using Kyle's character and developing a new iteration of the soldier-hero type.

History

To understand the various forces at play in the realm of war cinema, one must first have an understanding of the history behind the depictions. War, in one form or another, has existed since the dawn of human history. Despite this, the carnage it could cause was relatively limited before the rise of the modern era. Modern weapons and machinery fundamentally altered the nature of conflict, creating new tactics and traumas alike. In *The Norton Book of Modern War*, veteran Paul Fussell compiles an extensive collection of the soldier narratives from these new, modern wars. Fussell contextualizes the firsthand accounts with detailed historical summaries of the conflicts the soldiers describe. His historical analyses of WWI, WWII, and the Vietnam War provide an excellent framework for discussing the relationship history shares with the cinematic

media that depicts it. To complement Fussell's analysis, it is important to discuss the media representations of the wars as well. Martin Barker, a film scholar, devotes an entire chapter of his *A Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films* to the history of war cinema. In his text, Barker identifies a series of character archetypes closely associated with each war. These character-types retain specific characteristics that are developed in an iterative manner as the nature of war evolves. The most enduring of these character types is that of the soldier-hero. The soldier-hero takes different forms in each war, developing off of the formulas used in the previous one, thus becoming a narrative focus for filmmakers. The nature of this cinematic device requires a comprehensive discussion of each occurrence to develop an understanding of how the soldier-hero functions in cinema. Fussell and Barker's discussions of the major wars in American history lay the groundwork for an understanding of contemporary war cinema as an iteration of past formulas. History and cinema are intertwined, as the nature of war in the historical moment create expectations for cinematic devices to reflect the current experience of war.

Character archetypes associated with war cinema first became readily apparent with the First World War. World War I marked the dawn of the new age of war. It carries a number of characteristics that subsequent modern wars do not share, as the experience of World War I altered the shape of history. Fussell describes the war as a destruction of innocent idealism, as young men, enamored with traditional notions of chivalry and comradeship, were slaughtered by the new technologies (29-30). The tactics of the war were a product of the new developments in technology. The horrifyingly effective weapons necessitated the iconic trenches synonymous with the First World War. Separated by a few hundred yards of No Man's Land, armies would dig miles of layered trenches and fortifications across from one another. Soldiers lived in the trenches for weeks at a time, sharing their living space with millions of lice and rats. Rotting

corpses littered the field (31-33). Constant fortification and preparation for attack made large-scale actions unbelievably costly. Describing the disastrous Battle of the Somme, Fussell writes, “Of the 110,000 who attacked, 60,000 were killed or wounded before the day was over. More than 20,000 lay dead between the lines” (33). During the slaughter, British soldiers walked across No Man’s Land after a week of bombarding German lines with artillery. Despite the bombardment, the German soldiers opened fire with machine guns and completely destroyed the attacking British divisions (33). The sheer futility of chivalry in an environment where death was dealt randomly and without mercy became readily apparent as the war progressed. Soldiers died without regard to their moral character; an artillery shell kills indiscriminately. Machine guns, massed artillery fire, barbed wire, and poison gas changed the battlefield from a struggle between individuals to large-scale actions between armies.

Civilian society did not transition quickly from cultural understandings of ritualized warfare to the new indiscriminate combat of World War I. Fussell describes the discrepancy, saying “The war was being mediated through the language of a dead chivalry rather than that of the new industrialized murder” (34). The failures of civilian language to represent the true nature of military service had a number of consequences. For the average member of the armed forces, hatred for the press developed out of the rigid censorship that kept civilians from knowing the true horrors military personnel faced (34). Civilian society discussed the war in the traditional terms, silencing the soldiers who knew the realities of modern combat. However, the failures of civilian conversations on war to capture the experience effectively remains a historical motif. The failures of the civilian media to capture the nature of war are not entirely the fault of civilians or governments themselves. The experience itself is nearly impossible to capture, even for the often silenced military personnel who lived through it.

Despite the difficulties in the attempting to convey the military service experience, many filmmakers did eventually create narratives with World War I as their focus. Beginning with World War I, Barker identifies the “Doughboy.” This term refers to the “massification of soldiers, their loss of differentiation, along with a sense of trudging and grudging participation in the horrors of war” (47). Instead of distinct individuals standing against the backdrop of war, WWI reduces soldiers to figures against a horrific landscape. The technological developments in weaponry, coupled with stagnant and miserable battlefields, left soldiers without distinct identities in cinematic representations of their experiences. One does not excel or distinguish oneself on these fields of battle; survival is the only goal. A war in which individual heroes cannot and do not exist because of the efficiency of death-dealing weaponry contrasts sharply with all wars that took place prior to World War I. The lack of any “soldier-heroes” for World War I brings to focus not only the world-wide trauma induced by the modern capacity for destruction, but also the difficulty in channeling that experience through traditional media. The damage a new form of war can do to the traditional language used to discuss military service is readily apparent in World War I, leaving it as an example for future wars that significantly alters the experience of combat.

The technologies that shocked the world during World War I were refined and perfected by World War II. Advanced weaponry and tactics drove the death toll of combat to ever-higher levels, increasing both the length and severity of engagements. The recapture of continental Europe from the Germans and the Pacific islands from the Japanese was agonizingly drawn out. Fussell describes the back-and-forth exchanges of territory that made the war so long and bloody. Germany invaded Poland, followed by Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, and eventually the Soviet Union. Nearly the entire continent was under German or German-allied

control, forcing the Allies to retake land slowly in a costly ground campaign. All the while, civilian deaths on both sides increased as massive bombing campaigns grew commonplace, reducing neighborhoods to rubble and slaughtering countless civilians. On the Pacific front, progress was similarly slow. The Japanese initially seized the Philippines, Malaya, and Burma, along with other islands throughout the Pacific. To retake them, the Americans were forced to engage in bloody, drawn out battles for each individual island. Fussell's documentation of World War II captures not only the massive scope of the combat, but also its increasingly deft usage of modern weaponry and tactics (308-310). The extended fighting and advanced technologies created a death toll unlike anything the world had ever seen before.

Fussell opens his historical account of World War II with the same awareness of the war's magnitude, turning to numbers to present a suitable introduction. He writes, "Killed and wounded were over 78 million people...close to 6 million Jews were beaten, shot, or gassed to death...over 50 million young men and women worldwide were mustered into armies, navies, and air forces" (307). The sheer scope of numbers is inconceivable. To attempt to visualize the scale of World War II is an exercise in futility. For example, the 20,000 British dead at the Battle of the Somme was doubled by the civilian deaths in the bombing of Hamburg (307). The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed well over a hundred thousand civilians with a single device each (307). World War II only accelerated the massive increase in the efficiency of wartime weaponry begun in World War I. The technologies pioneered in the First World War were refined: tanks and planes were used offensively in massive numbers. When describing the battle of Kursk, where six thousand Russian and German tanks and four thousand planes fought against one another, Fussell quotes Robert Leckie, "the smoke from burning tanks blotted out the

sun...out of the blackened sky fell shrieking, burning airplanes” (307). The scale of death and destruction in World War II exceeded World War I by a wide margin.

Just as World War II refined and advanced the tactics and weaponry of World War I, the cinematic forms of World War I were redefined to fit the context of World War II. The massive size of the war, coupled with an intense focus on, and awareness of, the soldiers who served shifted cinematic techniques away from the indescribable masses of the “Doughboy.” Instead, films focused on select groups or squads of service personnel, representing their experiences and actions as exceptional. The primary cinematic motif to come about as a result of this shift is the soldier-hero. Two films exemplify this new motif, what Barker refers to as the “GI” (48). The first, *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1941), shows an unwilling hero struggling with morality before finally embracing the war using his “exceptional markmanship” (48). Based on the real-life experiences of Alvin York, the film shows York as a reformed man, a former drunkard and fighter who finds his peace in religion and farming his small patch of land. After receiving a draft notice, he struggles with the morality of killing for one’s country. He ultimately determines that he can leave the judgement of morality to God, and serves willingly. His markmanship skills allow him to successfully capture a German unit almost singlehandedly, saving his own men in the process. York’s actions earn him a Congressional Medal of Honor, and he returns to his small-town home and is presented with a gift for his valor: a larger farm provided by his community. The fundamental characteristic of York is that, despite questioning the legitimacy of the war due to his religious faith, he ultimately decides to fight for patriotic reasons. Defeating the enemy and defending his country is more important than potential moral qualms on killing. Barker notes that the film serves as powerful recruiting material for a country on the brink of embroiling itself in a massive war (48). Clearly, while *Sergeant York* takes place during World

War I, the film is historically immured in World War II. Released as the United States prepared for involvement in World War II, York's film connects the two wars with its discussions of morality.

The other quintessential World War II film that continued to refine the soldier hero is *To Hell and Back* (Jesse Hibbs, 1955). Released after WWII, and during the Korean War, the film documents another soldier performing beyond expectations to defend his comrades and defeat the enemy. Audie Murphy, another highly decorated real-life soldier whose experiences were well known, performs acts similar in heroism to York's. The film depicts Murphy joining the army to support his younger siblings. He distinguishes himself in the service, slowly rising in rank until he reaches second lieutenant. Near the end of the film, in Murphy's final battle, he holds off a German attack with the machine gun mounted on a burning tank. Murphy is horribly wounded but protects his men. As with York, his actions earn him the Congressional Medal of Honor. Both York and Murphy join the military with strong morals, distinguish themselves, and earn acclaim as a result. However, as Barker notes, Hibb's film contrasts with *Sergeant York* by using a dark realism as "soldiers are wounded, suffer, and die" during the conflict (49). Both characters became clear embodiments of the quintessential American war hero to which service personnel should aspire. These two films, and the character types they present, depict the beginnings of the soldier-hero. York, clearly invested in his morality, defends his comrades against seemingly overwhelming odds. Murphy does the same thing, fighting the same enemy in WWII. Both display self-sacrifice, bravery, and a willingness to die for one's comrades and beliefs. These character traits form the foundation for the soldier-hero.

Beyond York and Murphy, the development of the soldier-hero archetype continued as several other cinematic figures contributed to its evolution. The figure best known in American

civilian consciousness for his role as the soldier-hero is John Wayne. Barker describes the John Wayne films in the following way:

In Wayne's image, wars were fought on clear moral premises in which right was unarguably on America's side. Soldiers fight without fear or quarter, but without hatred; with respect for human dignity and for the differences between combatants and civilians, women and children. (50)

Wayne's character embodied a type of frontier masculinity, direct and courageous, with firm morals and physical presence. His traditional values, coupled with unwavering patriotic beliefs, made him a prime figure for the traditional American hero (50). The many films in which Wayne participated cemented this type of hero into the public consciousness as the ideal military "man."

Wayne's military image is similar to York and Murphy during his WWII films. For example, *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1950) involves the quintessential Wayne WWII character. Despite not serving in the military himself, Wayne's embodiment of the military ideal through the character of Sergeant Stryker, along with his deference to actual military personnel in the film, allows him to become a symbolic soldier-hero. Stryker embodies the ideal masculine soldier in the film. He leads a squad of less-than-ideal soldiers by example, forcing them to train and follow his orders without question. When Marines are pinned down during the Battle of Tarawa, he demolishes the enemy fortifications. While he brutally punishes disobedience and laxness, he does so because such activities can endanger lives. When he meets a woman at a bar while on leave, he gives her money to support her infant child. During the Battle of Iwo Jima, Stryker is unexpectedly killed by a Japanese sniper. His men avenge him, then go on to witness the famous raising of the flag. His character's death, according to Barker, serves as a careful negotiation between the fictional and the real (52). The flag-planting event was real, and Wayne

was not present in reality; therefore, to maintain the a sense of authenticity, his character had to die. This careful construction of a symbolic hero in Stryker, rife with the mythology of heroic sacrifice, cements the character's place in the soldier-hero consciousness. World War II's create clear lines of moral conduct and straightforwad mission made the soldier-hero an ideal cinematic image of military personnel.

Each iteration of the soldier hero from World War I and World War II are easily identifiably with one another due to the similarities of the conflicts. Both wars were massive, brutal feats of violence that shattered the status quo and remade the world. No armed conflict since has fielded as many personnel or caused as much destruction. However, that does not mean that the conflicts to follow have had any less of an impact on American culture. Vietnam is one such case. Fussell dates American involvement in Vietnam to 1950, when President Truman sent thirty-five advisors to help the French resist a Vietnamese guerrilla army (651). As the French withdrew, American involvement increased. President Johnson used the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Incident to justify an active intervention, resulting in the presence of half a million troops by 1965 (652). A few years later, the Viet Cong offensive in 1968 pushed the Americans onto the defensive, shifting the tide of war (652). Events like the My Lai Massacre, leaving hundreds of Vietnamese civilians dead at American hands, created countless antiwar protests (652-653). Ultimately, the war ended in an American defeat with hundreds of thousands of casualties and dead (653). With such a massive death toll, while the Vietnam War may have been smaller in scale than the previous World Wars, the brutality of the fighting matched them.

Fussell discusses many of the controversies surrounding the American tactics and conduct during the Vietnam War. In this war, seizing territory was no longer the primary path to victory. Instead, American troops were pushed to use the now infamous "body count."

Determining victory based on the number of enemy combatants killed, when the enemy was not easily identifiable, created the conditions for abuse and slaughter (654). Fussell notes the consequences of this by describing the behaviors possible when one's enemy was easily dehumanized. Fussell quotes Phillip Knightley, who writes, "One colonel wanted the hearts cut out of dead Vietcong...Parts of Vietnamese bodies were kept as trophies" (655). The circumstances of the Vietnam War, with its lack of a clear mission and brutal fighting conditions, created a dangerous mentality in the soldiers. Fussell describes the rhetoric of soldier writing of the day as "sardonic-joky style, half-ironic, totally subversive" (655). Many personnel embraced the peace sign, wearing it ironically. Others used the quantitative goals of the war to their business-like relationship with killing, creating their own business cards and ads to disparage the enemy (655). All of these conditions contributed to an environment that destroyed many of the traditional motifs used to represent war in media.

The soldier-hero developed during World War II did not function for the Vietnam War. War conducted in a new environment, with new rules of engagement and victory, coupled with increasingly negative public attitudes towards the war, severely damaged the soldier-hero's validity. Attempts to create authentic soldier-heroes in this new context failed. For example, *The Green Berets* (Dir. Ray Kellogg, John Wayne & Mervyn LeRo, 1968), Wayne attempted to create a WWII Stryker-like soldier-hero within the Vietnam War, Colonel Mike Kirby. In the film, Kirby educates the ignorant anti-war reporter George Beckworth by taking him to Vietnam and showing him the realities of the war Beckworth covers for the public. Together, they face the brutal tactics of the Viet Cong, befriending and aiding innocent Vietnamese civilians. The film attempts to justify the brutality of the war by displaying the savage acts of Viet Cong soldiers, justifying American responses in kind. When Viet Cong soldiers attack and capture a special

forces camp in a night of intense fighting, Kirby responds by calling in an AC-47 to decimate the enemy and free the camp. The film ends with Kirby telling a Vietnamese orphan boy that Kirby is fighting for him. Like Stryker, Wayne's character, Kirby, is a competent leader and embodies masculine virtues. He picks men for his unit based on their skills, rather than their seniority. He leads them on dangerous missions in the fields, exacting retribution for wrongs done by Viet Cong. He cares for the civilian population and always treats bystanders with respect. At the same time, he is brutal in combat, using overwhelming firepower to defeat enemy soldiers. In sum, Wayne's Colonel Kirby embodies all of Sergeant Stryker's characteristics, recontextualized in the Vietnam War.

Despite his efforts with Kirby, Wayne's attempt to reconstruct the WWII soldier-hero in the Vietnam context failed in the light of the fundamental realities of the war. In his text, Barker evokes, "the oft-repeated tales of Vietnam vets laughing when they saw Wayne's characterisation of that war in *The Green Berets*" (50). When the war failed to adhere to clear moral lines, when the veterans were present enough in public consciousness to speak about their experiences directly—these developments fractured the simplified realities dealt with by the idealized hero figure. In *The Green Berets*, Wayne attempts to create the same romantic narrative using the soldier-hero he created in his previous films. However, the Vietnam War failed to adhere to the clear moral lines he used to negotiate WWII. Vietnam consisted of complex guerilla jungle warfare, using the infamous body count as a determinant of victory, as opposed to the land-based battles of WWII. These differences shift the war from being morally and tactically clear to being mired in complex politics and difficult ethical dilemmas. The failure of Wayne's soldier-hero to successfully translate Vietnam for the civilian populace left a vacuum in the cinematic narrative.

The failure of idealized images like Wayne's Colonel Kirby recognized that new renditions of the soldier-hero were required to negotiate the Vietnam context. Most notable of these character-types is John Rambo. In *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), Rambo reinvented the soldier-hero for Vietnam. Barker describes the characteristics of this new character-type, "Denied and dismissed by officers and politicians alike, Rambo deploys all the skills and loner instincts of the mythic Green Beret to go alone, endure the pain, and enact the rescue" (61). In the film, Rambo struggles against the prejudices against Vietnam veterans. He is a Vietnam veteran and recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor. When Rambo travels to a small town in Washington, the sheriff, Will Teasle, tries to force him to leave. When Rambo returns, Teasle arrests him and torments him in jail. When the police attempt to forcibly shave him, they trigger a flashback to Rambo's traumatic experiences in captivity at the hands of the North Vietnamese forces. He overpowers his captors and escapes. The massive manhunt that follows forces Rambo to use his Green Beret training to resist capture. Despite honorable service during the Vietnam war, Rambo's treatment by civilians reflects a societal shift away from valuing the soldier-hero as an icon of American values.

Rambo's victimization at the hands of civilians represents the failures of the traditional narrative to represent Vietnam. Isolated, angry, and violent, Rambo becomes a symbolic outlet for the feelings with which many veterans dealt after encountering critical civilian perspectives on the war. The sheer hostility of the American civilian population against the Vietnam War and any military personnel associated with it is well-documented. The cheering crowds of World War II evolved into enraged anti-war protestors for Vietnam. As one can imagine, Vietnam veterans felt betrayed, frustrated by the complete lack of support when many of them were drafted into service. After months of brutal combat and exposure to the elements, veterans

returned to a population that oftentimes expressed outright hatred towards the military. Rambo is a manifestation of that betrayal. Gone are the clean-cut, traditional military men of Wayne's films. Rambo is alone, forced to use all of his brutal skills to defend himself from the population he fought for during the war. Abandoned by the government and military he served, he must take justice into his own hands. Rambo, as the soldier-hero in Vietnam, is not only capable of incredible feats of violence, but is also willing to do whatever it takes to defend himself.

Rambo's character, as the epitome of the military competency, would have been a hero in previous wars. Instead, due to the historical context surrounding Vietnam, he is ostracized and abused. The development of the soldier-hero closely follows the historical circumstances of war. With the industrialization of war in World War I, the "Doughboy" demphasized individual characteristics and endured the horrors of war. World War II shifted the cinematic focus to the squad and created the "GI." The clear morals and unambiguous combat of World War II developed strong soldier-heroes like Sergeant Stryker, who reflects the calm competence of the well-trained soldier fighting for a just and righteous cause. He lives in a world where traditional values and the systems of government are in alignment, providing a sense of purpose and justice. Later, when value systems fall apart in Vietnam, the soldier-hero fails as well. For example, Wayne's attempt to recreate World War II heroes in Vietnam with Colonel Kirby failed to address the fundamental realities of the war. Later, when Rambo arrived, his valiant military career served only as a sign of disdain in the eyes of the sheriff and other civilians. To clarify, while Rambo was just as competent and skilled as characters like Stryker and Kirby, the soldier-hero was no longer valued by civilian society. The disconnect between military and civilian values alienated the veteran in cinema. The shift from the acceptance and popularization of

heroes during World War I and World War II to the disdain and disregard of the same types of figures in Vietnam recognizes the iterative nature of the soldier-hero in cinema.

The Iraq War Films

Just as the figure of the soldier-hero evolved between World War I, World War II and Vietnam, so too has it evolved from Vietnam to contemporary Iraq War cinema. However, this evolution is not a complete break from the past versions of the figure. Instead, it is an iteration, building on the images of the past to fit into the new context. Just as Stryker and Rambo became the icons for their respective wars, so too has a new figure become the representative of his war. Navy SEAL Chris Kyle is this new figure. The popularity of Eastwood's cinematic adaptation of Kyle's experiences places Kyle in the same historical cinematic space as Stryker and Rambo. As a director, Eastwood's careful construction of Kyle's character—despite deviating from Kyle's own construction of himself in his memoir—follows the examples set by the previous archetypes while reconstructing them within the Iraq War experience.

Contextualizing the Iraq War is much more difficult than has been the case for previous wars. The primary cause of this difficulty lies in the nature of the conflict and its documentation. In previous wars, military personnel, journalists, and television reporters would document their experiences in long-form narratives, photographs, and film footage. More recently, contemporary technological advancements have created a new form of interaction between the public and military, shifting focus away from older techniques of documentation. Instead of writing letters home, personnel simply call, or video chat with, their loved ones. They also record videos of their experiences and post them on the Internet, allowing the world to see real-time imagery of the war. Barker refers to this phenomenon as the “YouTube War,” describing the video's primary focus, regardless of contents, as being “authentic” (33). For example, soldiers would

record themselves in action or testing equipment, describing their opinions and documenting the minutia of their lives (33). There, instead of relying on others to inaccurately or incompletely translate their experiences for civilians, military personnel used the Internet to communicate the fundamental realities of their lives directly. These new developments in technology created an explosion of individual perspectives. No longer was the experience of conflict mediated and filtered before public consumption; now, civilians could view and hear personnel and their experiences directly.

Despite the wide variety of perspectives available for analysis, it is relatively simple to make a few definitive statements regarding the nature of the Iraq War, which shares a number of similarities with the war in Vietnam. Both involved attempting to fight an enemy that blended into the common populace, creating a guerilla war built around ambush and booby traps. Also, both wars lacked a clear mission, leaving many personnel feeling disenfranchised and frustrated with their commanders. In addition, at the beginning of the war, personnel were thrust into a foreign culture with little preparation. Military personnel in both wars dealt with a disinterested and, at times, hostile civilian population. However, despite the overt similarities, key differences do exist. Military personnel serving in Iraq were volunteers, not draftees. However, many personnel had their tours involuntarily extended (“stop-losses”) due to a lack of volunteer replacements. Beyond entering and exiting the military, the experience of service has shifted as well. Rules of Engagement and extensive documentation have limited abuses and unjustified kills, while restricting the ability of military personnel to use their own judgement. All of these conditions create an Iraq War narrative voice that is both eerily similar to Vietnam and remarkably different.

Films attempting to capture the Iraq War's unique narrative qualities vary to an incredible degree. However, all retain one common quality: financial failure. Barker identifies this commonality in his research. He identifies a cycle of twenty-three Iraq War films that he dubs "toxic." Barker's list of films spans release years from 2005 to 2008, beginning with *American Soldiers* (Sidney Furie, 2005) and ending with *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008). All of them, excluding *The Hurt Locker*, completely failed at the box office (1,4). Only *The Hurt Locker* succeeded in terms of budget against ticket sales. While these statistics do not account for secondary markets, such as DVD sales, the lack of public interest in the films upon release is astounding. Even films with widely recognized actors—*Home of the Brave* (Irwin Winkler, 2006) with Samuel L. Jackson or *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007) with Tommy Lee Jones—failed to capture public interest. The lack of interest in films released during the war contrasts sharply with Kyle's post-war cinematic popularity.

Despite the harsh nature of the market towards Iraq War films, Eastwood's *American Sniper* captured public attention and acclaim. The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) documents the film's USA gross at \$350,126,372 (IMDB). With an estimated budget of \$58,800,000, the film earned an exorbitant amount of money compared to the other Iraq War films (IMDB). This raises a fundamental question: What did Eastwood do differently? How did he succeed where all the others failed? The answer lies in the history of war cinema. Eastwood carefully constructs Kyle as a hero following the mold of previous iterations of the soldier-hero, but recontextualized for the Iraq War. In other words, Barker's characteristics of Iraq War films are recognized, but carefully maneuvered into a narrative that supports the iteration of a new soldier-hero. The construction of the film around Kyle's character allows Eastwood to sidestep many of the issues faced by the other films in the genre. For instance, he avoids dealing with the complex political

issues surrounding the Iraq war, such as the reasons for going to war, which weigh down other films. An awareness of Barker's characteristics allows one to see how Eastwood not only constructs a new iteration of the soldier-hero in Iraq, but also avoids the controversies surrounding previous Iraq War films.

In his analysis of the Iraq War films, Barker identifies a series of nine characteristics, divided into subgroups of three. Each of the films he studied focusing on the Iraq War embodies some of these characteristics, which, while not individually unique to the genre, combine to create a distinct cinematic voice (42-44). The first group, describing the 'Iraq War' experience, involves depicting military personnel as ordinary, even average people. They are not grandiose heroes, but everyday citizens who decided to join the military. The demphasis on individual heroic tendencies shifts the focus of the films from the suffering of the individual to the suffering of the group. That is, heroic actions are not the purvey of any special type of person. All can act in heroic ways. The war pushes individuals to support their comrades in any manner necessary, simply to survive to return home. The Iraq War soldiers share this common backstory, embracing a common American identity while coming from backgrounds as varied as the American population as a whole.

The general, average nature of Iraq War military personnel develops in Eastwood's film through Kyle's backstory. While Eastwood opens the film with Kyle's first tour in-country, he quickly flashes back to Kyle's childhood. The flashback serves to construct Kyle as an everyday American, one who embodies quintessential aspects of American culture. In the flashback scenes, Eastwood follows Kyle from childhood to young adulthood, allowing the viewer to observe his value system as it develops. The first scene from Kyle's childhood shows Kyle and his father on a hunting trip. Kyle shoots a deer and approaches the body, still alive, with his

father. When Kyle drops his rifle on the ground while approaching the animal, Kyle's father stops him and demands that he retrieve it. The lesson: one must always respect a weapon, treating it with care at all times. The father's criticism is tempered by a compliment on the quality of the boy's shot. The next scene is of the family in church. The preacher lectures from the pulpit while Kyle and his brother look at the Bible. The preacher reminds everyone that they do not see with God eyes, and so do not see the world with the clarity he does. Kyle pockets the Bible. Eastwood cuts again, this time to the family at the dinner table. Their father lectures at them, describing the world as being made up of three types of people: sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs. Sheep are placid victims and easily herded, wolves prey on the weak, and sheepdogs protect the sheep from the wolves. At this moment, the film flashes back to children fighting on the playground. A bully is punching Kyle's brother in the face. After a moment, Kyle breaks the circle of chanting children and defeats the bully. Back at the dinner table, his father puts his belt on the table, chastising both of his sons for being the wrong type of people. Kyle's brother interjects, saying he was only fighting because the bully was picking on another child. These three scenes embrace traditional values that are prized by the Stryker archetype: respect for the family, respect for the traditional familial patriarchy, and the selective use of violence to support both. One is permitted to fight, to kill, but only if it is necessary. These values are introduced to Kyle as a child, cementing their place in his character for the more difficult moral decisions he makes later.

As a young adult, Kyle develops further as a symbol of a typical American by engaging in traditional experiences from American culture. He rides wild horses at county fairs, bickers with his brother when his brother mentions negative rumors about Kyle's girlfriend, and breaks up with his girlfriend when he finds out she cheats on him. These experiences are typical of

young adulthood, at least in the cinematic universe. Following the breakup, Kyle and his brother drink beer and watch television. A news broadcast depicts a terrorist attack on Americans, leaving Kyle flabbergasted. He immediately decides to join the military. For Kyle, this is an unavoidable action. His childhood conditions him to protect those he perceives as being innocent (returning to the sheepdog, wolf, and sheep metaphor). Contextualized with his upbringing, his actions are not exceptional, but expected. The recruiter Kyle visits to enlist in the military guesses at his reasoning, emphasizing the common motivations shared by the many service personnel who volunteered after witnessing the 9/11 attacks: protect the innocent, strike against the attackers, and defend the country. Again, Eastwood, in his backstory for Kyle, goes to great lengths to construct his character as a representative of the average, regular American who becomes a protector to the innocent. Anyone raised with the same value system would share Kyle's origins and beliefs.

The common background of Iraq War military personnel unites them prior to service. The unifying process continues during the service experience itself, as illustrated by Barker's second point. As personnel deploy, they arrive at military bases solely under American control. However, once they leave the secure bases, "they become naïve innocents, stunned by the hostility they encounter" (43). The personnel leave the familiar and enter the unfamiliar, moving into a realm with which they have little to no experience. The land, customs, and language are all different from the personnel's previous environments. Beyond the newness, the violence they face while interacting with the Iraqis shocks and traumatizes them. With guerilla warfare, improvised explosive devices (IEDS), and a general willingness to engage in brutality, insurgents shock and dismay American personnel.

Kyle, despite his presentation of warrior strength, deals with this same loss of innocence. The opening scene of the film involves him shooting a woman and child attempting to kill American Marines. If Kyle's judgement is inaccurate, not only will he go to military prison, but he will also have taken innocent lives for no reason. After he kills them, he silences the man who attempts to congratulate him. The deaths, while justified by the violence the woman and child threatened to his comrades, shock him. Later on, he tells one of the men in his unit that he'd never seen evil like that before. Despite being told that he was only doing his job, the thought of killing supposed innocents clearly troubles Kyle. He never grows accustomed to the depths of violence he must face. He is stunned. The psychological stresses of killing do not diminish for Kyle. On his fourth tour, Kyle shoots an insurgent who has an RPG. A child runs up and struggles to lift the weapon onto his shoulder. As he does this, Kyle quietly begs the boy to drop it and run away. Kyle tightens his finger on the trigger, preparing to shoot. However, the child drops the weapon and runs, leaving Kyle to choke and collapse from the stress of the moment. Kyle does not expect children to try to kill Americans. When he sees them doing so, it horrifies and traumatizes him.

The impact of this trauma is the third aspect of this group of characteristics. As Barker notes, the traumatic experiences of military personnel in Iraq fundamentally alter them. These changes force a division between the personnel and the civilian realm. Personnel no longer identify with the everyday realities faced by the civilian population. Barker describes the split as "stress and disconnection from civilian life" (43). Considering the personnel's origins as everyday civilians, the lack of connection is particularly troubling. Service personnel returning to the civilian realm no longer identify as civilians, instead, they view their military experiences as the foundation of their identities.

The disconnect between civilian and veteran realms of experience makes moving between the two difficult. Eastwood's film captures veteran struggles to deal with civilian life, as Kyle's relationship with the civilian realm deteriorates slowly as his military career develops. When he first enters the service, he meets Taya. They marry prior to his first deployment, and his connection with her begins to diminish after he leaves. While they communicate over the phone, he must privilege his mission over their conversations. During one conversation, he drops the phone to engage in a firefight, leaving her listening to the sounds of gunshots and screaming with no confirmation that he survived the encounter. When Kyle returns on leave, he is distant and disconnected from her. At a party they host, he stays in the living room, reliving his deployment experiences, while the guests enjoy themselves outside. He sees a dog playing with a child as a threat, and nearly hits the animal with his belt. Only Taya stops him by breaking him out of the moment. Later, Kyle redeploys despite Taya's requests that he stay with her. However, while Kyle does grow disconnected from the civilian realm as a result of his military service, his reintegration differs significantly from Barker's characteristic. Kyle ultimately heals the split between himself and his family. He becomes a father figure to his son and daughter, a husband to his wife, eventually paying them the attention they deserve. He reintegrates into civilian society by recreating a military environment for himself. The veteran services organization he finds allows him to spend significant amounts of time with other veterans as he connects with them by shooting targets at a gun club. Ultimately, while Kyle struggles with disconnection with the civilian realm during his service career, he ultimately reconnects with his family and finds meaning in being a veteran.

While the experiences of individual personnel form the core of films, the larger context the war helps to explain their circumstances. Barker's next three elements document the

“Narrative account of Motives, ” which attempt to explain the circumstances surrounding the personnel. The fourth characteristic concerns officers and the chain of command. Barker identifies these officers as “placemen, driving their men cynically into terrible situations, but primarily concerned with protecting the military’s reputation” (43). Here, there is a clear distinction between the enlisted personnel and their officers. In this case, the officers care little for the personal well-being of their personnel. The chain of command only wishes to avoid controversy in the civilian realm. Avoiding any type of controversy is vital when a poor decision can lead to the deaths of innocent Iraqi civilians and the exposure of such action via the civilian media. In an attempt to prevent any criticism from the civilian realm, officers callously ignore the needs of their men.

In *American Sniper*, Eastwood deviates, in part, from this characteristic. Kyle rarely encounters officers. In fact, only two make an appearance worth noting. The first contradicts Barker’s point entirely. The officer in charge of Kyle’s squad meets with them after an ambush left one member of the squad severely wounded. The officer offers the squad an opportunity for revenge, allowing them to go out and seek justice for the wrong they had been done. While the mission is a failure, the officer’s understanding of their rage and grief allows the unit to move forward. On the other hand, officers not directly responsible for missions are more in line with Barker’s expectations. When Kyle is called in for questioning over the legitimacy of one of his kills, he dismisses the validity of the complaint. The officer says the wife of the man he killed claimed her husband was only carrying a Qur’an, not a weapon. Kyle retorts that the Qur’an must be able to shoot 5.62 ammunition. The relationship between Kyle and the officer enforcing the ROEs (Rules of Engagement) makes Barker’s point clear. The officer, in this case, is only concerned with enforcing the rules and ensuring that a public relations issue does not develop.

He does not care about Kyle's perspective or well-being. In this case, Kyle does not deal with any consequences after the questioning, unlike service personnel in other Iraq War films. While certain officers still support and understand men like Kyle, others question his motives and statements to avoid possible negative press coverage.

According to Barker, the overt hostility towards enlisted personnel and the emphasis on protecting the military's reputation leaves the personnel without strong authority figures. No one explains to the everyday personnel why they are being sent into such terrible situations. The purpose of their suffering is not explained or developed, leaving personnel surrounded by inadequate justifications for the war. Barker describes the consequences of this vacuum in his fifth point, "ordinary soldiers expressing confusion about the purposes of the war, sometimes directly challenging why they are there" (43). Both aspects of this characteristic are incredibly dangerous to unit morale. Not understanding the purpose of the war leaves personnel without explanation or justification for the suffering they must endure and actions they must take. The lack of support from officers, defined in characteristic four, leaves personnel with no avenue to clarify this confusion of purpose. Left to their own devices, forced to suffer, fight, and die without a clear reason, personnel eventually challenge why they must endure such circumstances. The direct confrontation with the purposes of the war, without any clear support from authority figures, damages morale irrevocably.

Overtly expressing confusion or challenging the war effort implies personnel are dissatisfied with their circumstances. Eastwood carefully negotiates between recognizing the possibility for this dissatisfaction and dismissing it as invalid. In Eastwood's film, Kyle never questions the war himself. His responses to the questions of others, however, show viewers the depths of his devotion. When his fellow SEAL, Mark, dies in an ambush, for example, Kyle

returns Stateside to attend the funeral. Mark's wife reads a letter he wrote, questioning the nature of the war itself. The letter asks if the war is just. This sentiment echoes a conversation Kyle and Mark had earlier in the film, when he told Kyle that he wants to believe in what they were doing. These types of questions fulfill Barker's characteristic, but Kyle immediately dismisses their validity. Kyle cannot comprehend the purpose in questioning the war. He fights to defend the innocent and helpless, killing insurgents before they can kill his men. Kyle's fundamental belief in the justness of his cause, his unquestioning faith in the goodness of the United States, prevents him from seeing the possible negative implications of his, and the military's, actions. He tells Taya that Mark died—as in, gave up on the war—when he wrote that letter. Kyle does not need to question the war, because his war is to do his job. By recognizing that this characteristic exists, Eastwood validates previous Iraq War films and the military perspectives they depict. By dismissing the same characteristic, Eastwood defines Kyle as a true patriot—a man who wholeheartedly supports his nation no matter the cost.

While Kyle may support the United States without question, Barker acknowledges that others may not have that faith. The absence of reliable justifications for the war from the command structure leaves an opening that other explanations fill. Political, economic, and bureaucratic systems appear in the background of Iraq War films, subtly explaining the circumstances of the war. Barker notes, in his sixth characteristic, that these explanations are often inserted non-diegetically, for example, appearing on television screens in the background, to show the other forces behind the war effort (43). These forces include companies making incredible profits from the war, politicians using it to expand their own power, and bureaucrats using it to secure or advance their own positions. Many Iraq War films undercut the publicly proclaimed motivations for war; such as protecting the innocent or defeating terrorism, by

displaying these positive benefits for those in power. The films dissolve the traditional justifications for war by indirectly acknowledging the unspoken motivations of the powerful, drawing hidden institutionalized systems into the light.

Generally, pointing out the unacknowledged benefits for war amounts to a direct criticism of those in power. In *American Sniper*, Eastwood avoids any criticism of the war's origins. In Kyle's world, there is only one reason the United States declared war: to defend itself. He joins the military when he sees a terrorist attack on innocent Americans on the television. His unit deploys immediately after 9/11. No other explanations are offered. Eastwood thus avoids the political quagmire of delving into the justifications for war by focusing on Kyle, who joins the military and fights because of these terror attacks on innocents. As a quintessential American, the protagonist's beliefs, and motivations to protect the innocent, can be applied to the average American's sentiments and value systems as a whole. Eastwood not only avoids the political controversy of determining guilt for the war, but he also reframes the narrative in terms of patriotism.

Eastwood's narrative frame for the war provides an straightforward interpretation of its circumstances, which is vital to any Iraq War film, by emphasizing patriotism. In doing so, Eastwood centers his narrative on Kyle as a character. Barker acknowledges the importance of character's to Iraq War cinema with his final group of characteristics, which concern how military personnel become "moral heroes." His seventh common trend in Iraq War films is that personnel bond with one another. The first loyalty of the unit is to the individuals within it. Personnel are pushed to rely on each other, rather than outsiders, due to the failures of those outside of the unit. Barker notes, "Officers, politicians, civilians all fail them. They are effectively alone, unwanted, sacrificial victims" (43). Their isolation and rejection forces them to

become a tighter group, dividing the world into an “us” vs. “them” mentality. As personnel bond with one another against the failures of their leaders (both military and political), as well as civilians, in a struggle to survive and return home, they become moral heroes.

Moral heroism in the Iraq War is complicated by the moral greyness of the war’s circumstances. Eastwood acknowledges this in part by developing the bonds between Kyle and the men in his unit who share their personal lives with one other. They celebrate children at home and discuss relationships. They engage in a joking rapport, mocking one another with good natured humor. Kyle’s friends refer to him as “The Legend” due to his kill count, though they immediately debase the title with crude humor regarding Kyle’s propensity to perform lewd sexual acts. The strength of these bonds extends into the battlefield. The film illustrates this at one point, when Kyle abandons his overwatch position to help Marines engage in door-to-door clearing. He does this because he feels the urge to protect them; as one who has knowledge and training that could help save lives, he must act. Eastwood develops all of the positive aspects of personnel loyal to one another without addressing any of the negatives. The failures of officers, politicians, and civilians that Barker identifies are not present in Eastwood’s film. The restrictive ROEs are the closest Kyle comes to criticizing the military as an institution and, at most, they slightly inconvenience him. When questioned about the validity of one of his kills, he must meet with a desk officer unfamiliar with the realities of combat, avoiding any negative repercussions for his actions. Beyond the military, Kyle’s interactions with civilians beyond his wife and children are nonexistent. It is only after Kyle dies that Eastwood shows the civilian response, which is one of grief and adoration in a funeral parade. While the strength of bonding and comradeship are present, the negative circumstances that push such bonds to arise are conspicuously absent.

The reason the failure of officers, politicians, and civilians is such a betrayal lies in the next characteristic. The moral greyness of the Iraq War, coupled with the sheer violence of the conflict, leaves personnel in a difficult position. The stress of their experiences, Barker's eighth characteristic explains, leaves them, "struggling to hold on to values in the face of all that happens around them" (43). Personnel enter the military with a core value system that dictates their beliefs. For example, many cinematic soldiers from Iraq War films value protecting innocent lives. This becomes complicated when those who appear innocent, like children, become fighters in the war. How does the value system compensate with this inherent contradiction? Struggles like this one make up the core of Iraq War cinematic narratives. Simply maintaining an intact moral code and surviving the war experience becomes moral heroism.

Documenting the development of a moral code is a complex process. Eastwood does so by following Kyle's progression from childhood to adulthood. Kyle maintains the same code that he developed as a child in his adult life. He protects those weaker than himself, taking the role of the sheepdog in a world of sheep and wolves. Moreover, Kyle does not abandon his moral code during his military service. Instead, he relies upon it. Killing women and children causes him immense stress, but he never allows that stress to break him down. On his first tour, as noted, he shot the woman and child because he was certain they presented a clear threat to the Marines he was protecting. On his fourth tour, he refrained from shooting a boy, even though the child held an RPG pointed at another group of Marines. Kyle did not act because he was not certain that the boy would, and so saved the boy's life. The boy dropped the weapon and ran away. Kyle's restraint shows that he still maintains his moral values, despite the depths of violence he was witnessed. He never assumes that an innocent is an enemy; he waits until it is proven until he takes action. In a realm where waiting too long can mean death, his control is a strong testament

to the strength of his character. Kyle becomes a moral hero by retaining his values in the face of violence and death.

The ninth and final aspect of the moral heroes of the Iraq War deals with victimization. In certain situations, a new type of hero emerges. Barker identifies these as “representatives of minorities...who can embody perfectly a new kind of soldier: the hero-victim” (43). Barker provides an example of this idea by citing the treatment of Latino grunts by Iraq War cinema. Just as the war disproportionately pulled young Latino men into the military, the war film places them as the predominant victims of the horrors of war (142-147). While they may perform heroic feats, their minority status in the military and society prevents them from achieving true justice. They are discriminated against, both overtly by individuals and by the hidden systems that oppress them. The lack of their acceptance on the part of the mainstream civilian culture, coupled with experiencing the horrors of wars, doubly demeans them. In the end, the hero of these films is not simply the individual who goes above and beyond the call of duty, although those certainly exist, but merely the one who experiences all the horrors of war and survives. The hero-victim is a fascinating new development in the soldier-hero’s iterations, firmly rooted in the Iraq War context.

The hero-victim is a figure built around soldier-sacrifices in the Iraq War. Military personnel must not only sacrifice themselves for the mission, but are also subsequently disenfranchised by the civilian population. The financial failure of Barker’s Iraq War cycle of films, including the many that utilized the hero-victim, problematizes Barker’s construction. Kyle, as a generalized representation of the quintessential American, manages to fulfil several aspects of the hero-victim as a sacrificial figure. The ostracization of the veteran from civilian society post-deployment prevents him from fully reintegrating and returning to mainstream

culture. While Kyle does not deal with the types of discrimination faced by Latino personnel, he no longer identifies with the broader civilian population, forcing him to create a niche if he wishes to find meaning outside of the military. He assembles a group of wounded veterans, no longer actively serving, and constructs a group identity and attempts to help those veterans in need. In this case, Kyle's civilian identity is sacrificed as a result of his service. He cannot simply return and resume his previous life. His ultimate failure to do so results in his death. Specifically, as related in the film, the group Kyle creates allows an unstable individual to gain close proximity to him, and he kills Kyle. In the end, Kyle is a sacrificial figure. Like all military personnel, he sacrifices his civilian identity for a militarized one. The victimization of the hero requires that service also severs connection to one's former life. The lack of reintegration prevents him from returning wholly to the civilian realm, leaving him in the quasi-civilian world of the veteran.

Kyle's journey from civilian, to Navy SEAL, to veteran is meticulously documented by Eastwood. As an American, Kyle is a manifestation of American lore: A Texan, raised on the rodeo, with strong traditional values, and a sense of duty and patriotism. His experiences, during the war, and upon returning to civilian society, both reflect and deviate from characters in the previous Iraq War films. In other words, Eastwood carefully emphasizes aspects of Iraq War cinema compatible with the traditional hero narrative established in previous eras of war film, while subtly undercutting the complex and controversial aspects of the Iraq War. Doing so allows Eastwood to construct a film, and a main character, who is thoroughly rooted in the Iraq War context without the weight of political controversy.

Kyle's success as a soldier-hero depends on Eastwood's development of his character. As previously noted, Eastwood's Kyle is not the same individual as the one presented in Kyle's

autobiography. Kyle's own documentation of his life and experiences is significantly different from the film's depictions. Small details, such as the type of grenade used by the insurgent woman (Chinese to Kyle and Russian to Eastwood) are altered to better fit into the traditional cinematic war narrative. Similarly, Eastwood alters Kyle's motivations for going to war to better embody patriotism. In his memoir, Kyle recalls that he did not enjoy college and could no longer ride in the rodeo, making the military an obvious career choice (18). This is far different from Eastwood's Kyle, who witnesses a terrorist attack and immediately goes to the recruiter's office.

Just as he overemphasizes Kyle's positive traits, Eastwood minimizes Kyle's controversial exploits and views. The film does not, as Kyle does in his autobiography, document the Kyle shooting beach balls out from under swimming insurgents and watching them drown (178). Similarly, Eastwood minimizes Kyle's disdain for the Iraqis, who he refers to as savages (or lazy, when discussing the allied Iraqi Army). The point in discussing the alterations Eastwood made to Kyle's character is not to demonize the man or dismiss his exploits as invalid, but to recognize that the cinematic version is fundamentally different. Eastwood turns Kyle into a cinematic hero. He minimizes negative traits and overemphasizes positive ones by using the character archetypes that govern cinematic narratives.

Conclusions

The history of war cinema is irrevocably intertwined with the wars the films represent. With the faceless horror of World War I comes the "Doughboy," a malleable soldier-archetype lost in the industrial machine of war. With the refined violence of World War II, moral heroes stepped into leadership roles. Alvin York, Audie Murphy, and Sergeant Striker all embrace

courage and heroism as they defend comrade and country. World War II's clear morality allows Striker to succeed in embodying traditional values. When war becomes morally unclear, such manifestations no longer work. Rambo, despite earning the same military honors as York and Murphy, is dismissed and looked down upon. This break in the soldier-hero narrative reverberates into the Iraq War cinema. The World War II soldier-heroes and the values they espouse no longer function in guerrilla wars built around ambushes and traps. Despite this, these values still form the foundation of civilian society. Creating any meaningful soldier-hero narrative requires recognizing the inability of the traditional hero to cope with the complexities of the Iraq War, while still presenting those values to avoid alienating a civilian audience. Enter, Chris Kyle, a man raised with classic traditional values, but willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish his mission. A new iteration of the soldier-hero, Chris Kyle's character is a fascinating development in cinematic history, both participating in the Iraq War film narrative characteristics and embracing historical archetypes at the same time.

Eastwood's *American Sniper* constructs a new soldier-hero in Chris Kyle by following the pattern of the previous iterations. This rendition of the archetype, while it shares certain characteristics with the previous versions, is solidly rooted in the context of the Iraq War. The Kyle soldier-hero's attributes can be divided into three subgroups: pre-service, service, and post-service. Pre-service refers to the time before military service. The Kyle-archetype is raised from childhood with traditional values and a strong moral compass, based on protecting the innocent and defending the defenseless. These traditional values extend to patriotic attitudes towards the nation and a steadfast faith in America. The fundamental pre-service characteristics are then applied to active military service. During active service, the Kyle-archetype retains a strong moral code. Killing an individual requires a clear and present threat, anything less is not

justifiable. However, if the threat is present, death must be dealt out swiftly to minimize the risk to comrades and innocents. Even so, struggling with killing is a natural side effect of this archetype's strong values. Remaining true to one's morals in the face of brutality and evil is the foundation of Kyle's character and of his iteration of the soldier-hero. The Kyle-archetype refuses to be broken by the horrors of war, returning home as a survivor post-service. The importance of the archetype's actions as a protector during service results in a struggle to reintegrate into the civilian realm. The archetype downplays valor during service and serves to present a new identity as a veteran, bonding with other veterans to find meaning. Experience gained during service and beyond is used to help other suffering veterans recover and reintegrate.

The characteristics of the Iraq War soldier-hero redefine what it means to be a military hero in contemporary cinema. Eastwood's representation of Kyle's character survives the moral quagmire of Iraq with an intense focus on just action and an unyielding faith in the United States. He does not question the war or its purpose, only seeking to perform his duty to the best of his ability. He protects his comrades and does everything in his power to preserve life. In the struggle to find a concrete meaning in war, Kyle finds purpose by selflessly protecting those who cannot protect themselves. However, if surviving the war with morals intact means not questioning it to begin with, it remains to be seen how the soldier-hero will cope with the increasingly complex conflicts of the modern era.

Works Cited

- Barker, Martin. *A 'Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films*. Pluto Press, 2011.
- Dwan, Allan, director. *Sands of Iwo Jima*. Republic Pictures, 1950.
- Eastwood, Clint, director. *American Sniper*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2014.
- Fussell, Paul, editor. *The Norton Book of Modern War*. Norton, 1991.
- Hibbs, Jesse, director. *To Hell and Back*. Universal International Pictures, 1955.
- Howard, Hawks, director. *Sergeant York*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1941.
- Kellogg, Ray, John Wayne and Mervyn LeRo, directors. *The Green Berets*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1968.
- Kyle, Chris. *American Sniper*. HarperCollins, 2013.