



2010.II.03

Sebastian Junger, *War*. New York: Twelve Books, 2010. Pp. xii, 287. ISBN 978-0-446-55624-8.

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For most Americans, the ongoing war in Afghanistan, now nine years old and counting, is an abstraction. As one combat veteran put it in an article on “military shooter” video games, whereas 2.2 million Americans “experience” this war daily by playing *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*¹ on Xbox Live, only 0.5 percent of Americans will ever deploy there, and a much smaller percentage of those will see combat. “There’s something annoying that most of America experiences the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which are actually taking place, through a video game.”²

Sebastian Junger, an intrepid journalist and well-known author of *The Perfect Storm*,³ seeks in his latest book to bring the Afghan war home to Americans. From June 2007 to June 2008, he made five trips to the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan, embedding with American troops as they attempted, unsuccessfully, to dominate and pacify this remote and rugged area in Kunar Province, just north of the Khyber Pass. He was accompanied by British photojournalist Tim Hetherington; the product of their labors was the book under review and *Restrepo*, a feature-length documentary about the Korengal Valley and the Afghan war.⁴

As an American correspondent embedded with U.S. troops, Junger admits he cannot write objectively or neutrally about the war, but does claim “it is entirely possible to write with honesty about the very personal and distorting experiences of war” (26); in this he is successful. He divides his account into three sections: “Fear,” “Killing,” and “Love,” the second being the longest. He allows American soldiers to speak for themselves, adding his own reflections on the burdens and perils of military service based on his reading of such classics as Lord Moran on courage and J. Glenn Gray on warriors and war.⁵ In so doing, Junger provides a brutally convincing depiction of what it is like to fight in an exposed position in inhospitable terrain against a rarely seen and poorly understood enemy.

The strength of Junger’s account—its unflinching portrayal of an American combat unit and the American way of war in Afghanistan—also exposes a weakness. For Junger largely ignores the motivations of the enemy and especially the impact of the war on the Afghan people.⁶ As he notes, American war making relies heavily on high-tech weaponry and the profligate expenditure of ammunition and conventional munitions, from .50 caliber machine gun rounds to grenades to 30-mm cannon and heavier mortar and artillery rounds to 2000-pound bombs dropped by B-1 bombers, all in support of platoon- and company-level operations. Reconnoitering by massive firepower did not go out after the Vietnam War, but the technique inevitably leads to noncombatant casualties and collateral damage that undermine the counterinsurgency strategy of winning Afghan hearts and minds. After one such case of unintended civilian casualties, Junger recounts that the Afghan elders of Yaka Chine met to declare jihad against all Americans in the valley, despite the apologies and appeal of the U.S. commander at the scene (99–100).

The Taliban make do mainly with rifles (including WWI-vintage bolt-action Lee-Enfields), rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and a few machine guns.⁷ Partly because of this wide disparity in firepower, U.S.

1. For details of the game, see *Wikipedia*, s.v. “*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*” <www.miwsr.com/rd/1031.htm>.

2. Chris Suellentrop, “War Games,” *NY Times Magazine* (12 Sep 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1032.htm>.

3. NY: Norton, 1997; feature film (Warner Bros., 2000), dir. Wolfgang Petersen.

4. Dir. Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger (Outpost Films, 2010).

5. Respectively, *The Anatomy of Courage* (1945; rpt. NY: Carroll & Graf, 2007) and *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959; rpt. Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 1998).

6. See Nick Turse, “Death on Your Doorstep: What Sebastian Junger and *Restrepo* Won’t Tell You About War,” *TomDispatch.com* (13 Jul 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1033.htm>.

7. C.J. Chivers, “What’s Inside a Taliban Gun Locker?” *NY Times* (15 Sep 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1034.htm>.

forces come to respect their foe's toughness, tenacity, and resourcefulness (19, 170) in the face almost every weapon in the U.S. arsenal. And the Taliban have a few "force multipliers" and special techniques of their own:

For every technological advantage held by the Americans, the Taliban seemed to have an equivalent or a countermeasure. Apache helicopters have thermal imaging that reveals body heat on the mountainside, so Taliban fighters disappear by covering themselves in a blanket on a warm rock. The Americans use unmanned drones to pinpoint the enemy, but the Taliban can do the same thing by watching the flocks of crows that circle American soldiers, looking for scraps of food. The Americans have virtually unlimited firepower, so the Taliban send only one guy to take on an entire firebase. Whether or not he gets killed, he will have succeeded in gumming up the machine for yet one more day (83).

Junger's firsthand depictions of American soldiers are both flattering and disturbing: to be sure, they offer hard-hitting, exciting, visceral celebrations of the troops' machismo, determination, and fighting power. But they also evince a cautionary tale of American hubris, of efforts squandered, of pointless military and civilian deaths. Reluctant to draw sweeping conclusions or specific lessons from the Afghan war, Junger shows us the face of war as alternately exhilarating and horrifying, hateful and loving. His narrative style is impressionistic, his goal almost anthropological in its scrutiny of war among the "natives" who pursue it with such fervor. While such an approach has limitations, it does force readers to see war up close and to witness how it alters its participants, often for the worse.

Indeed, reviews of *War* have praised it for revealing the hellish realities of the Afghan war (at least for U.S. troops), and certainly the mainstream media image of precision operations conducted cleanly by unmanned aerial drones deserves criticism; a signal contribution of Junger's account is his insistence that American infantry soldiers are neither icons of heroism nor champions of truth, justice, and the American way.⁸ This is hardly news to military initiates, but it may surprise Americans who have been encouraged by propaganda to view the war as invasive but ultimately beneficial surgery performed by "hometown heroes."

Having lived with American frontline soldiers, Junger shows a side of military service seldom contemplated in the United States. The men let off steam by beating one another and release sexual tension with pornography, masturbation, and homoeroticism—"we're like monkeys, only worse," one soldier says apologetically (5). The soldiers are patriotic not in any "Mom and apple pie" sense but in a "duty-bound, brothers-in-arms" ethos. Unable to explain why the war is necessary ("ours not to reason why/ ours but to do or die"), they find purpose and clarity in combat; the resulting adrenaline rush is an addiction not easily overcome.⁹

War is a lot of things and it's useless to pretend that exciting isn't one of them. It's insanely exciting. The machinery of war and the sound it makes and the urgency of its use and the consequences of almost everything about it are the most exciting things anyone engaged in war will ever know [Combat] is the ultimate test, and some of the men worry they'll never again be satisfied with a "normal" life—whatever that is—after the amount of combat they've been in. They worry that they may have been ruined for anything else (144, 155).

Junger's dissection of war and its seductions may not be new, but it provides a needed corrective to the "war is ennobling" trope common among some Americans, even soldiers like Col. Dan Williams, a helicopter brigade commander in Afghanistan: "War does change you, I believe in a better way, a noble way. A decade of combat has made us very hard. It has made us an incredibly strong Army. I believe we do have a warrior class in this country."¹⁰ One wonders what Williams would say in response to a recent documentary

8. See Graeme Wood's review of *War* in *Barnes and Noble Review* (7 May 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1035.htm> and Dexter Filkins, "Nothing to Do but Kill and Wait," *NY Times* (14 May 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1036.htm>.

9. See H.D.S. Greenway, "The Addiction to War," *NY Times* (21 Sep 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1037.htm>.

10. See David Wood, "In the 10th Year of War, A Harder Army, A More Distant America," *PoliticsDaily.com* (9 Sep 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1038.htm>.

on the crippling costs of war for some of these same “very hard warriors,”¹¹ or even for the journalists who bravely document the fighting.¹²

Junger, no stranger to these questions, documents the frustration and mental anguish of combat veterans like Sgt. Brendan O’Byrne, who after his tour of duty goes AWOL and eventually leaves the Army, only to consider reenlisting because he cannot adjust to “normal” civilian life, something foreshadowed by his earlier confession that “Combat is such an adrenaline rush. I’m worried I’ll be looking for that when I get home and if I can’t find it, I’ll just start drinking and getting in trouble. People back home think we drink because of the bad stuff, but that’s not true ... we drink because we miss the good stuff” (232).

At what costs do we turn men into battle-hardened killers? What happens when the war is over or the warrior retires, and he knows nothing but war? How do we assimilate the warrior back into civilian society? Junger has no answers, but he does make a demand:

In a very crude sense the job of young men is to undertake the work that their fathers are too old for, and the current generation of American fathers has decided that a certain six-mile-long valley in Kunar Province needs to be brought under military control. Nearly fifty American soldiers have died carrying out those orders. I’m not saying that’s a lot or a little, but the cost does need to be acknowledged. Soldiers themselves are reluctant to evaluate the costs of war (for some reason, the closer you are to combat the less inclined you are to question it), but someone must. That evaluation, ongoing and unadulterated by politics, may be the one thing a country absolutely owes the soldiers who defend its borders (154).

To American soldiers, the tragedy of Afghanistan is that no such evaluation has occurred. We owe a debt of thanks to Junger for reminding us of that fact as well as for chronicling so incisively the seductions and horrors of war.

11. *The Good War* (Out of the Blue Productions, 2009), dir. Lexy Lovell and Michael Uys.

12. E.g., Michael Ware, currently suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after covering war for years for CNN: see Jason Linkins, “Michael Ware, Former CNN War Correspondent, Speaks Out on Alleged War Crime CNN Refused to Air [Updated],” *Huffington Post* (23 Sep 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1039.htm>.