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War, Snipers, and Rage from *Enemy at the Gates* to *American Sniper*

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Abstract

The concept of war is inextricably linked to violence, and military action almost always resounds with the emotion and language of rage. Since the War on Terror began in September 2001, post-9/11 expressions of terror and rage have influenced academics to evaluate rage and its meanings (Gildersleeve and Gehrmann). Of course, it has directly influenced the lives of those affected by global conflicts in war-torn regions of the Middle East and North Africa. The populace there has reacted violently to military invasions with a deep sense of rage, while in the affluent West, rage has also infiltrated everyday life through clothes, haircuts, and popular culture as military chic became 'all the rage' (Rall 177). Likewise, post-9/11 popular films directly tap into rage and violence to explain (or justify?) conflict and war. The film version of the life of United States Iraq veteran Chris Kyle in *American Sniper* (2014) reveals fascinating depictions of rage through the perspective of a highly trained shooter who waits patiently above the battlefield, watching for hours before taking human life with a carefully planned long-distance shot. The significance of the complexities of rage as presented in this film are discussed later.

Foundations of Rage: Colonial Legacy, Arab Spring, and ISIS

The War on Terror may have purportedly begun with the rage of Osama bin Laden's *Al Qaeda* missions and the responding rage of George Bush's America determined to seek vengeance for 9/11, but the rage simmering in the Middle East has deeper origins. This includes: the rejection of the Shah of Iran's secular dictatorship in 1979, the ongoing trauma of an Arab Palestinian state that was promised in 1947, and the blighted hopes of Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab nationalism that offered so much in the 1950s but failed to deliver. But these events should not be considered in isolation from events of the whole 20th century, in particular the betrayal of Arab nationalism by the Allied forces, especially Britain and France after the First World War. The history of injustice that Robert Fisk has chronicled in a monumental volume reveals the complexity and nuances of an East-West conflict that continued to fracture the Middle East. In a Hollywood-based film such as *American Sniper* it is easy to depict the region from a Western perspective without considering the cycle of injustice and oppression that gave birth to the rage that eventually lashed out at the West.

Rage can also be rage against war, or rage about the mistreatment of war victims. The large-scale protests against the war before the 2003 Iraq invasion have faded into apparent nothingness, despite nearly two decades of war. Protest rage appears to have been replaced by outrage on behalf of the victims of war; the refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and those displaced by the ever-spreading conflict that received a new impetus in 2011 with the Arab Spring democracy movements. One spark point for rage ignited when Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi embarked on his act of self-immolation in protest against harassment by public officials. This moment escalated into a kaleidoscope of collective rage as regimes were challenged from Syria to Libya, but met with a tragic aftermath. Sadly, democratic governments did not emerge, but turned into regimes of extremist violence exemplified in the mediaeval misogynistic horror now known as ISIS, or IS, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Hassan).

This horror intensified as millions of civilised Syrians and Iraqis sought to flee their homelands. The result was the movement of peoples, which included manipulation by ruthless people smugglers and detention by governments determined to secure borders — even even as this eroded decades of consensus on the rights of refugees. One central image, that of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi's corpse washed up on a beach (Smith) should invoke open rage. Here, the incongruity was that a one-time Turkish party beach for affluent 18 to 35-year-olds from Western Europe would signify the death place of a Syrian refugee child, now displaced by war. The historical significance of East/West conflicts in the Middle East, recent events post-Arab Spring, the resulting refugee crisis in the region, and global anti-war protests should be foremost when examining Clint Eastwood's film about an American military sniper in Iraq.

Hot Rage and Cold Rage

Recent mass shootings in the United States have delineated factions within the power of rage: it seems to blow either hot or cold. US Army psychiatrist Major Nidal Malik Hasan was initially calm when he embarked on a public expression of rage, wounding 30 people and murdering 13 others in a mass shooting event in 2009 (MacAskill). Was this to be categorised as the rage of a nihilist, an Islamist - or as just another American mass shooting like events in Orlando or Sandy Hook? The war journalist and film maker Sebastian Junger authored a study on belonging, where he linked mass shootings (or rampage killings) to social stress and disunity, as a "tendency rising steadily in the US since the 1980s" (115-116). In contrast, the actions of a calm and isolated shooter on a rooftop can be justified as acceptable behaviour if this occurs during war. Now in the case of Chris Kyle, he normalised his tale of calm killing, as an example identified by action "built on a radically asymmetric violence" (Pomarede 53).

Enemy at the Gates

The point is that sniper killings can be presented in film as morally good. For example, the 2001 film *Enemy at the Gates* portrays a duel of two snipers in Stalingrad, Russia. This is a fictionalised contest of a fictionalised event, because there was only tangential evidence that Russian sniper hero Vasily Zaytsev actually engaged in a three-day sniper duel with his German enemy during the Second World War. *Enemy at the Gates* presents the sniper as an acceptable figure in mass popular culture (or even a hero?), which provides the justification for *American Sniper*. However, in this instance, viewers could recognise a clear struggle between good and evil.

Politically, *Enemy at the Gates*, whether viewed from a conservative or a progressive perspective, presents a struggle between a soldier of the allies (the Soviet Union) and the forces of Nazism, undeniably the most evil variant of fascism. We can interpret this as a defence of the communist heartland, or the defence of a Russian motherland, or the halting of Nazi aggression at its furthest expansion point. Whichever way it is viewed, the Russian sniper is a good man, and although in the movie's plot the actor Ralph Fiennes as political commissar injects a dimension of manipulation and Stalinist authoritarian control, this does not detract from the idea of the hero defeating evil with single aimed shots. There is rage, but it is overshadowed by the moral 'good.'

American Sniper

The true story of Chris Kyle is quite simple. A young man grows up in Texas with 'traditional' American values, tries sport and University, tries ranch life, and joins the US Navy Special Forces. He becomes a SEAL (Sea, Air and Land) team member, and is trained as a specialist sniper. Kyle excels as a sniper in Iraq, where he self-identifies as America's most successful sniper. He kills a lot of enemies in Iraq, experiences multiple deployments followed by the associated trauma of reintegration to family life and redeployment, suffers from PTSD, returns to civilian life in America and is himself shot dead by a distressed veteran, in an ironic act of rage.

Admired by many, the veracity of Kyle's story is challenged by others, a point I will return to. As noted above, Kyle kills a lot of people, many of whom are often unaware of his existence. In his book *On Killing*, Lieutenant-Colonel David Grossman notes this a factor that actually causes the military to have a "degree of revulsion towards snipers" (109), which is perhaps why the movie version of Kyle's life promotes a rehabilitation of the military in its "unambiguous advocacy of the humility, dedication, mastery, and altruism of the sniper" as hero (Beck 218). Most enlisted soldiers never actually kill their enemies, but Kyle kills well over 100 while on duty.

The 2012 book memoir of United States Navy sniper Chris Kyle at war in Iraq became a national cultural artefact. The film followed in 2014, allowing the public dramatisation of this to offer a more palatable form for a wider audience. It is noted that military culture at the national level is malleable and nebulous (Black 42), and these constructs are reflected in the different variants of *American Sniper*. These cultural products are absorbed differently when consumed by the culture that has produced them (the military), as compared to the way that they are consumed by the general public, and the book *American Sniper* reflects this. Depending upon readers' perspectives, it is a book of raw honesty or nationalistic jingoism, or perhaps both. The ordinary soldier's point of view is reiterated and directed towards a specifically American audience.

Despite controversy and criticism the book was immensely successful, with weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. While it naturally appealed to many in its primary American audience, from an Australian perspective, the jingoism of this book jars. In fact, it really jars a lot, to the point of being quite challenging to read. That Australian readers would have difficulty with this text is probably appropriate, because after all, the book was not created for Australians but for Americans.

On the other hand, Americans have produced balanced accounts of the soldier experience in Iraq. A very different exemplar is Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* blog that became the book *The Sandbox* (2007). Here American men and women soldiers wrote their own very revealing stories about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in autobiographical accounts that ranged from nuanced explanations of the empathy for the soldier's predicament, to simple outright patriotism. In their first-hand accounts of war showed a balance of ordinary pathos, humour — and the raw brutality of a soldier finding the neck stem of a human spine on the ground after a suicide bomb attack (Trudeau 161) — and even this seems more palatable to read than *American Sniper*. A similar book on the US military sniper experience (Cavallaro and Larsen) also shows it is possible to incorporate a variety of perspectives without patriotic jingoism, or even military propaganda being predominant.

In contrast to the book, the film *American Sniper* narrates a more muted story. The movie is far more "saccharine", in the words of critical *Rolling Stone* reviewer Matt Taibbi, but still reflects a nationalistic attitude to war and violence — appropriate to the mood of the book. American producer/director Clint Eastwood has developed his own style for skipping around the liminal space that exists between thought-provoking analysis and populism, and *American Sniper* is no exception.

The love story of Chris Kyle and his wife Taya looks believable, and the intensity of military training and war fighting, including the dispassionate thoughts of Kyle as sniper, are far more palatable in the film version than as the raw words on the page.

The Iraq War impacted on millions of Americans, and it is the compelling images shown re-living Chris Kyle's funeral at the film's conclusion that leaves a lasting message. The one-time footballer's memorial service is conducted in a Texas football stadium and this in itself is poignant: but it is the thousands of people who lined the highway overpasses for over 200 miles to farewell him and show respect as his body travels towards the funeral in the stadium, that gives us an insight into the level of disenchantment and rage at America's loss. This is a rage fuelled by losing their military 'empire' coupled with a traumatised search for meaning that Jerry Lembcke sees as inextricably linked to US national failure in war and the tragedy of an individual soldier's PTSD. Such sentiments seem intimately connected to Donald Trump's version of America, and its need to exercise global power. Kyle died before Trump's election, but it seems evident that such rage, anger and alienation experienced by a vast segment of the American population contributed to the election result (Kluger).

Calm Cold Calculation

Ironically, the traditional sniper embodies the antithesis of hot-blooded rage. Firing any long-distance range weapon with accuracy requires discipline, steady breathing and intense muscle control. Olympic shooting or pentathlons demonstrate this, and Gina Cavallaro and Matt Larsen chronicle both sniper training and the sniper experience in war. So, the notion of sniper shooting and rage can only coexist if we accept that rage becomes the cold, calculating rage of a person doing a highly precise job when killing enemies. In the book, Kyle clearly has no soldierly respect for his Iraqi insurgent enemies and is content to shoot them down one by one. In the film, there is greater emphasis on Kyle having more complex emotions based around the desire to protect his fellow soldiers by shooting in a calm and detached fashion at his designated targets.

Chris Kyle's determination to kill his enemies regardless of age or gender seems at odds with the calm detached passivity of the sniper. The long-distance shooter should be dispassionate but Kyle experiences rage as he kills to protect his fellow soldiers. Can we argue he exhibits 'cold rage' not 'hot rage', but rage none the less? It would certainly seem so.

War Hero and Fantasist?

In life, as in death, Chris Kyle presents a figure of controversy, being praised by the political far right, yet condemned by a diverse coalition that included radicals, liberals, and even conservatives such as former soldier Michael Fumento. Fumento commented that Kyle's literary embellishments and emphasis on his own prowess denigrated the achievements of fellow American snipers. Reviewer Lindy West described him as "a hate filled killer", only to become a recipient of rage and hatred from Kyle supporters. Paul Rieckhoff described the film as not the most complex nor deepest nor provocative, but the best film made about the Iraq war for its accuracy in storytelling and attention to detail.

Elsewhere, reviewer Mark Kermode argues that the way the film is made introduces a significant ambiguity: that we as an audience can view Kyle as either a villain, a hero, or a combination of both. Critics have also examined Kyle's reportage on his military exploits, where it seems he received less fewer medals than he claimed, as well as his ephemeral assertion that he shot looters in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Lamothe). In other claims, the US courts have upheld the assertion of former wrestler turned politician Jesse Ventura that Kyle fabricated a bar-room brawl between the two. But humans are complex beings, and Drew Blackburn sees it as "entirely plausible to become both a war hero and a liar" in his candid (Texas-based) assessment of one person who was, like many of us, a multifaceted figure.

Conclusion

This article has addressed the complicated issues of rage originating in the historical background of military actions that have taken place in the East/West conflicts in the Middle East that began in the region after the Second World War, and continue to the present day. Rage has become a popular trope within popular culture as military chic becomes 'all the rage'. Rage is inextricably linked to the film *American Sniper*. Patriotism and love of his fellow soldiers motivated Chris Kyle, and his determination to kill his country's enemies in Iraq and protect the lives of his fellow American soldiers is clear, as is his disdain for both his Iraqi allies and enemies. With an ever-increasing number of mass shootings in the United States, the military sniper will be a hero revered by some and a villain reviled by others. Rage infuses the film *American Sniper*, whether the rage of battle, rage at the moral dilemmas his role demands, domestic rage between husband and wife, PTSD rage, or rage inspired following his pointless murder. But rage, even when it expresses a complex vortex of emotions, remains dangerous for those who are obsessed with guns, and look to killing others either as a 'duty' or to soothe an individual crisis of confidence.

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