

## Competing Narratives: American Heroism between Propaganda and Modern War Poetry

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### Abstract

Since its liberation and being a destination for millions of immigrants worldwide, the USA has been considered a multiethnic melting pot. The immigrants from the Far East, Middle East, or Africa did not abandon their ideologies or languages. On the contrary, they created hybrid identities that did not suit the American national identity, which depended on some values and principles called The Creed. Among these principles, an American was supposed to be a white, Christian English speaker. Accordingly, the American government worked hard to endorse some nationalistic myths and symbols to rejuvenate the national identity in a modern sense through propaganda. Such symbols as the flag, heroes, and saints have been promoted in unison among all Americans, regardless of their background. In addition to the American Creed, the Americans have associated their mosaic with "exceptionalism" since their early beginnings. They consider that even with their multiethnic backgrounds, they are unique. They are democratic and liberal people who enjoy meritocracy because they are all equal. They also try to spread democracy around the globe.

Consequently, American propaganda boosted the concept of a valiant hero ready to save his country and die for the "noble cause." Wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan took place, and thousands of US soldiers were killed, but the governments still insisted that they were dying for the sake of the noble cause and to save their national identity. However, those who returned home survived the trauma of what they had seen and done on the battlefield every night. They jotted down their ordeal in various forms of literature and anti-war poetry, and it showed the extent of dissatisfaction among the veterans regarding their governments' decisions to start wars. Therefore, this poetry played the role of a counter-propaganda against the official propaganda, which embellished the concept of a hero.

**Keywords:** American war poetry, hero, propaganda, national identity

### الملخص

أصبحت الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية منذ تحريرها مقصداً لملايين المهاجرين من كافة أنحاء العالم. لذلك فقد تحولت إلى ما يشبه وعاء كبيراً يشتمل على أعراق متعددة. ولكن المهاجرين الذين تقاطروا

من الشرق الأقصى والشرق الأوسط وأفريقيا لم يتخلّوا عن معتقداتهم ولا عن لغاتهم. بل على العكس، فقد شكّلوا هويات هجينة لا تتناسب مع الهوية الأميركية القومية التي تقوم على عدة مبادئ وقيم تسمى العقيدة. ومن أهم هذه المبادئ أن يكون المواطن الأميركي أبيض البشرة، مسيحياً ويتحدث الإنكليزية. لذلك، فقد سعت الحكومات الأميركية إلى ابتكار بعض القصص والرموز القومية بهدف إعادة إحياء الهوية القومية وتوحيد كل الأميركيين مهما كانت خلفياتهم بمفهوم حديث وذلك باتّباع أسلوب الدعاية والترويج لبعض الرموز مثل العُلم والأبطال والقديسين. بالإضافة إلى العقيدة الأميركية، فقد اعتبر الأميركيون أنّ اختلافهم هو سبب كونهم "مميزين" منذ نشأة الدولة، فهم شعب لا مثيل له لأنه ديموقراطي وتحرّري يتمتع بالمساواة حتى في إمكانية التدرّج الاجتماعي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فهم شعب يحاول نشر الديموقراطية حول العالم. لذلك، فقد حاولت الدعاية الأميركية الترويج لمبدأ البطل الهام المتأهّب لإنقاذ وطنه والمضحي بنفسه لأجل هدفٍ سامٍ. وبعد حروبٍ عدة في فيتنام والعراق وأفغانستان، قُتل الآلاف من الجنود الأميركيين، ولا زالت الحكومات الأميركية تصرّ على أنّهم يقتلون من أجل الهدف السامي ومن أجل إنقاذ الهوية القومية. ولكنّ الجنود الذين استطاعوا العودة كانوا مصابين بصدمة الحرب بعد كل ما رأوه وفعلوه. لذلك، فقد كتبوا معاناتهم بأشكال أدبية ومنها الشعر الذي يُعتبر ضد الحرب ويعبر عن عدم الرضى على قرارات الحكومات في ما يتعلّق بالحرب. لذلك، فقد لعب هذا الشعر دور الدعاية المضادّة للإعلام الرسمي الذي كان يروج للبطل.

*الكلمات المفتاحية: شعر الحرب الأميركي، البطل، الدعاية، الهوية القومية*

## Introduction

Who counts as an American? What are the components of an American identity? Are the Americans "exceptional" as their propaganda claim? Who is an American hero? What is the role of propaganda in creating heroes? How is heroism connected with the American national identity?

"Historically," Huntington (2004) believes, "the substance of American identity has involved four key components: race, ethnicity, culture (most notably language and religion), and ideology" (p.12). For the first settlers who won their independence in the late eighteenth century, to be an American was to be an elite Christian, an English speaker, and, most importantly, white. These components unified them. "These settlers had come from the rich background of old England, its churches and hedge rows" (Adams, 1931, p.122). The first Americans considered themselves "exceptional" as they were the heroes who led the war of liberation, and they were supposed to be joined by some values and principles, called the Creed as The Declaration of Independence states. These values were liberty, equality, and democracy. No intruders were allowed into the Newfoundland. At that time, neither blacks nor Asians nor Hispanics were included in the citizenship formula.

Thus, to be an American meant to live in a democratic country – which also supports other countries to be democratic – all citizens are equal, whether in meritocracy or obtaining their rights, and people should be free to express their opinions through whichever means they prefer. Being an American meant living in peace, enjoying life, and fulfilling his/her dreams.

However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the USA—the land of dreams—welcomed newcomers from all around the world, and it became a multiethnic and multilingual country or a "nation of immigrants" (Lauret, 2016, "Americanization Now and Then," p.419). These immigrants did not abandon their identities; they spoke English with their accents, had different religions, and had their inherited ideologies.

Hence, the USA started to lose the core of its national identity, and to show their resilience; the successive US administrations followed new strategies to keep their "peoples" joined by one bond: war for the sake of the national cause and gaining the title of a "hero." By creating an "other," all the Americans will unite against this enemy to save their country. The enemies' flaws are exaggerated; 'We' are always good, while 'They' are always wrong. Creating a hypothetical enemy in the followers' minds strengthens the administration's convincing ability. 'They' are always portrayed as a recurring threat to 'our' existence; that is why 'we' have to fight 'them' as one unit, forgetting about 'our' multiethnic backgrounds to preserve 'our' position and postpone 'our' demise. Throughout the American history, it is clear that

[d]espite the massive suffering that violent conflicts bring, many perpetrators of such violence cast their militancy in favorable terms. Their acts of aggression against the enemy are moralized as good – performed for a cause to protect a nation, a people, or a way of life (Rothbart, 2019, p.3).

In a way, these perpetrators needed wars to collect some benefits from the attacked countries, like oil and natural resources, in addition to re-enforcing the national cause they were fighting for. Thus, the US administration relied on various strategies to control the public mind, such as embellishing heroism and heroic deeds through propaganda. It is taken for granted that the USA is one of the most advanced countries in creating a fleet of propagandists who innovate their tactics and strategies to tell the news in a way that suits the politicians' purposes. When mainstream media, such as CNN, FOX, ABC, The Washington Post, or The New York Times, focus on one issue, it is taken for granted that it becomes popular all over the USA. However, when censorship veils another issue, no one is interested to know about it. Enemies like Al-Qaeda, Communism, and Saddam Hussein were continuously exposed through headlines while the reality of the battles, whether in Vietnam, Afghanistan, or Iraq, was veiled.

Accordingly, the enthusiastic young men and women who participated in the successive wars were not aware of the nature of war, as their primary source of news was the official propaganda, so they drowned in the swamps of the attacked countries and realized the savagery of what they had done. These soldiers had to kill innocent people, and they were portrayed as savage beasts afterward. After living through this devastating experience, their homecoming is not an easy task; they have to face their invisible wounds, which keep reminding them of what they have changed into. After killing and committing crimes, what factors make

them or their national identity so "exceptional"? What kind of heroes are they? Accordingly, debates about the uselessness of war started to grow hotter and hotter.

Thus, as a way of expressing their ordeal and unveiling the true face of wars, these soldiers act as counter-propaganda and translate their experiences during war and what they have seen into words: novels like Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, memoirs like Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, documentaries like Oliver Stone's *The Untold History of the United States*, films like Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*, and poetry.

Goldensohn (2006) writes that

[t]he American war poem, beginning with a national identity yet to be defined and rooted in revolutionary independence's starvation, hardship, and dogged will, often evinces an unabashed and optimistic patriotism and a deep love of country. However, even in the early poems holding to such feelings, the moral conflicts that trouble the unequivocal acceptance of war are evident. Passages here and there point to the hot debates that have always smoldered beneath the fabric of war about who in a democracy should fight, when and why, and at what cost. (p. xxiii)

In most of the written experiences, the veterans feel lost between their patriotic and national identity and the "hero" title that they were supposed to earn on the one hand and the reality of being savages and cowards on the other hand. This research focuses on the war poetry written by veterans who chose to be storytellers of the actual war events to show that wars do not contribute to their "exceptionalism" as the official propaganda claims, and heroism is not necessarily connected with combatants or the battlefield.

### **Literature Review**

Much has been written about war poetry since WWI as it is a form of literature that touches the feelings and arouses sympathy. However, before Vietnam, poetry differed from that after Vietnam. WWI and WWII poetry was analyzed through poetic language, imagery, and figures of speech. Vietnam, on the other hand, was a turning point; the poetry that was generated after that era was considered political poetry that criticized the war and its motives, and it tackled the invisible wounds that the veterans kept hidden, such as their PTSD and nightmares.

Analyses of the American war poetry after Vietnam focused on the corruption of language used, the unprecedentedly immoral vocabulary used by the teens who were deployed, and the mental illnesses that the veterans suffered during and after the war.

Lorrie Smith (1986), for example, writes that the ugliness of wars not only eradicates humanity but also destroys the beauty of languages, and Vietnam is no exception.

It is now commonplace to observe the violence done to language, hence thinking and moral judgment, during the Vietnam era, to regret the euphemism, tautology, jargon, and illogic epitomized by phrases like 'peace offensive,' 'destroying a town to save it,' and 'kill ratio.' (Smith, 1986, par.2)

On the other hand, Herman (1992) talks about the shocking moment [which] becomes fixed in an unusual form of memory, which breaks naturally into consciousness, both as recollections during get-up states and as disturbing nightmares during sleep. Trivial, apparently irrelevant reminders can also arouse these memories, which often reoccur with all the gaudiness and emotive force of the original incident. Thus, even usually harmless settings may come to feel unsafe, for the survivor can never be sure that he will not encounter some reminder of shock. (Herman 37)

Similarly, Khalid (2018) discusses how written words were a way of expression for victimized veterans. He writes, "War poetry aims not to record or protest, yet it simply works as a medium of demonstrating the unspeakable memories" (Khalid, 2018, p.44).

This research will discuss what the other critics have missed. American war poetry is undoubtedly considered a way of protest. It is anti-war poetry that veterans write to tell their compatriots back home and their governments about the futility of wars and the unnecessary propaganda that hails "heroes" who die on the battlefield.

### **Methodology**

The chosen poems reveal many hidden aspects about the veterans themselves, the political decisions of their leaders, and the clashing definitions of their national identity. The veterans write their poems intending to persuade the audience of the futility of war; they act as counter-propaganda or a competing narrative to the official tales of war. At this point, this research adopts a rhetorical analysis that scrutinizes the method of persuasion proposed by the veterans.

### **Why Poetry?**

Why do soldiers choose poetry to reveal their worries, fears, and experiences? In fact, like all creative arts, poetry enshrines in its rhythmic diction the history of nations. Throughout the ages, poetry has allowed people to share ideas and emotions touchingly. Wordsworth tells us that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (From his Preface to the "Lyrical Ballads"). War is probably the primary human experience that generates an endless range of powerful feelings, as it creates contradicting feelings of hope and fear, victory and humiliation, a sense of belonging, alienation, and love and hatred.

### ***A Hero in the American Propaganda***

A real hero is an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, which includes toughness, the ability to control feelings, power, developed perception, and heterosexuality. Moreover, men try their best to achieve a heroic deed since manhood is always equated with power. They were afraid to be called impotent or sissy or un-masculine who “would behave differently: being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth” (Connell, 2005, p.67). In the modern sense, the

sources of heroes’ strength include personal physical power, intelligence, various technical skills such as firing a gun, virility, creativity, bravery, aristocratic birth, supernatural favor or lineage, wealth, even moral purity... Heroes’ sources of goodness also differ in innocence, protecting others, conformity to valued norms, a willingness to sacrifice oneself for others, generosity, or merely being helpful (Bergstrand & Jasper, 2018, p.231).

There is a common belief that one of the best means to achieve such qualities is to be in the military service because a soldier is often connected to his “brothers-in-arms”; they are supposed to share the same spirit of camaraderie, fight, and save their fellow countrymen, and they *may* sacrifice themselves to save others, even if they are strangers.

In notable cases, becoming a complete military man means achieving the status of a hero, standing out as exceptional within the giant machine of war. The hero fights with great skill, usually at close range, and for the *right reasons* (emphasis added, Peebles, 2011, p.52).

In Herman Melville’s novel *White Jacket* (1850), the writer writes that “we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the “Israel” of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world” (qtd. in Baritz, 1998, p. 26). Propagandists are very keen to view the supremacy of an American hero, especially the one who participates in wars against “savage” enemies.

“Americans saw themselves portrayed as idealistic, generous, and proud of their can-do spirit” (Brewer, 2009, p. 278), especially when they look back to their history and read about the first American wars that had a noble purpose. Gaining independence was due to the “collective experiences, together with the leadership of widely dispersed elites” (Huntington, 2004, p.113). Before the American contemporary wars, official American propaganda tried to spread myths about the glorious beginnings of the first heroes who defeated the nefarious enemy while defending their homeland. These historical myths usually play a role in deciding the nation's destiny. During WWII, President Roosevelt recited a speech via the radio.

‘Our sons,’ he began, ‘pride of our nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity... Lead us to the saving



of our country and, with our sister nations, into a world unity that will spell a sure peace – a peace invulnerable to the schemings of unworthy men. (qtd. in Beschloss, 2018, p. 420)

### ***The Vietnam War***

Vietnam was a turning point in the American history. The American troops were unaware of what awaited them in that land thousands of miles away. They heard on the television that if they did not go to Vietnam to eradicate Communism, then this “ogre” would flourish in the USA and steal everything, including their cars and TV sets (Brewer, 2009, p. 8). What these troops thought was that if they went there, they would win. However, these

Americans had limited actual knowledge of the country they were invading and a generally poor conception of the Vietnamese people—who saw the conflict not as a means of liberating them from the yoke of communism but rather as another effort at colonial subjugation (Weiss, 2019, par.2).

The taken-for-granted issues of patriotism, heroism, and fighting for the noble cause were almost busted during that war. Before Vietnam, warmongers had their replies to any skeptics about the reasons for war. “For soldiers who asked, ‘Why am I fighting in Korea?’ the Defense Department had an answer: They fought to protect the American way of life from global communism” (Brewer, 2009, p.152). Truman’s main slogan was, “The future of civilization depends on what we do” (qtd. in Brewer, 2009, p.141). However, these excuses did not convince the soldiers of the worth of sacrifices in order to prevent Communism – their presumed enemy – from flourishing. The teenagers who participated in the Vietnam War realized that their history was full of lies, the objectives of the war were lies, propaganda was full of lies, and they died for nothing.

Thus, the poetry – mostly free verse – which flourished after the Vietnam War is considered an anti-war poetry. It is a poetry of witness, narrated in the first person because the soldiers have experienced the battlefield's atrocities. As an example, the My Lai Massacre, in which the American soldiers murdered hundreds of civilians, including babies, constituted a moral failure in the history of war. The poets of the Vietnam War “represented themselves as soldiers who are simultaneously both victim and victimizer” (Goldensohn, 2006, p.287); they are the victims of lies and propaganda.

Curtis Bennett (2016) wrote a poem entitled “Young Men” about the Vietnam War. He shows how heroes were sent to a battle that they did not want to trudge, yet they accepted. However, they never came back

Silently they pass, eternal warriors  
Towards their unknown, to their death and hell.  
Whispering shadows blend with the foggy light  
In the ancient ritual of men marching to battle,  
Quietly, they slide away, merging in the bush,

Disappearing into the mist of time.

(<https://search.app/tPUm2GfhjxLnLojV8>)

The Vietnam quagmire pulled the American soldiers deep down and sucked their souls. They felt as if they were fighting ghosts, mainly because the Vietnamese were defending their land, so they created tricks and dug tunnels to be able to defeat the American troops. Poet Denise Levertov writes the poem “Weeping Woman” – a Vietnamese woman who works as a kindergarten teacher to show how the Vietnamese will win the war. Despite her amputated arm, this woman still faces the cruel America

Cruel America,  
when you mutilate our lands and bodies,  
it is your own soul you destroy,  
not ours. (Goldensohn, 2006, p.292)

The American loss in Vietnam created what was later called “The Vietnam Syndrome.” The American veterans could never forget their ordeal in Vietnam, and their comrades who – literally – disappeared in the Vietnamese swamps. Comrades who spend their wartime together create shared memories, everyday ordeal, common experiences and common dreams. Uttering last farewells to those comrades indeed creates traumatic soldiers who realize that they are losing their partners for nothing.

Even when the government tried to reduce the effects of the Vietnam Syndrome and built a black-granite monument for the Vietnam veterans in Washington, this monument acted the role of a reminder of what these veterans have done and whom they lost there. Gerald Mccarthy quotes from one of his friends, “Let us put up a monument to the lie,” and continues with a skeptical poem which he said as he was standing under this monument:

There are no words here  
to witness why we fought,  
who sent us or what we hoped to gain.  
There is only the rain  
As it streaks the black stone,  
These memories of rain  
That comes back to us –  
a hooded legion reflected in a wall. (Goldensohn, 2006, p.317)

Likewise, John Wilson, a poet who served as a Navy journalist in Vietnam, mourned that he was promised to come back home as a hero whom his compatriot's hail and he would probably heal from his invisible wounds with time, but Vietnam is still engrossed in his heart.

I am many years older now  
And the emotions should be gone  
But it seems there is no escape  
From my time in Vietnam  
Mostly, I remember going there



With Patriotism and Pride  
Then Coming Home again  
Scorned and Pushed Aside  
(Wilson, "Heal with Time", 2013)

### ***The War in Iraq and Afghanistan***

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, a series of four attacks, coordinated by al-Qaeda caused the destruction of the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, and hitting the Pentagon outside Washington D.C. Accordingly, there was a deviation in the global politics. The so-called "Global War on Terror" started, and Afghanistan and Iraq were the new targets of the American war. Meanwhile, the fad of nationalism popped up again; stripes and stars are everywhere, T-shirts, mugs, commercials and TV shows. The war administration tried to re-evoke the national cause and the defense of the "exceptionalism" of the American identity in order to urge the soldiers to take part in defending the national identity, and teach the "barbarians" a tough lesson. Philip Appleman's poem "Peace with Honor" is a good example:

They sent our toughest  
veterans, the Ninth Legion, the Fourteenth,  
the Hundred-and-First, their orders un-  
ambiguous: teach the barbarians respect. (Goldensohn, 2006, p.294)

Accordingly, enthusiasm overwhelmed the teenagers, especially those of the working-class background because the wealthy ones were less likely to enlist in the army. However, the American soldiers, who were still suffering from the scenes that they had witnessed in Vietnam, referred to the conflict in Iraq as "another Vietnam". Joanna Carman (2016) wrote three poems addressing her brother who shared in the war in Afghanistan, and was killed in Iraq. She starts Ed never cries

I hear him crying in his bed.  
Tomorrow he leaves, his day is near.  
His tears against everything he said  
About this place called War...  
Ed never cries.  
Mom and I are crying for him.  
His back all packed, his day is here,  
But Ed looks really scared.  
He's not tall and brave anymore; like us,  
He's afraid of the monsters.  
He picks me up and squeezes,  
Won't let go of me.  
(<https://search.app/3BnchZ74dzyBtqca7>)

Carman disagrees with the popular ideas of heroes in a combat. Her brother Ed did not cry before, but he cried as he knew that he was doomed. She talks

about the natural feeling of cowardice when it comes to facing death in a battlefield.

In a poem entitled “Evolution”, Curtis Bennett (2016) describes this unprecedented experience of war as unique; it is the generator of a stream of clashing feelings:

The experience of fighting a war  
Changes all men forever.  
The experience of taking human life  
And being responsible for death,  
The ending of life of others  
Becomes a life-altering experience  
Of any man who engages in a war,  
Who experiences its ugliness, its cruelty,  
Comes to know its pornography and savage brutality.  
(<https://search.app/tPUM2GfhjxLnLojV8>)

Hence, the veterans who have experienced the bestiality of the battlefield often do not lie because what they had seen or done was so real that no lies can veil it. Engaging in a war means that a soldier is playing the role of death; he is responsible for capturing innocent people’s lives, and this alters him to become a completely different individual. The contradiction between the soldiers’ delicate and ready-to-defend nature and their ugly and savage practices leads to an inner conflict and they shift into self-hatred because they belong to such a group with contradicting principles and practices. Their inherited “exceptional” identity which was based on the heroic deeds did not match with their deeds in the battlefield.

The war on Iraq differed from the previous ones as the Bush administration and propagandists tried hard to associate their war against the weapons of mass destruction WMD with the “noble cause” which all the Americans must fight for. Bush revealed that it was his country’s job to eradicate terror all around the world and especially in Iraq. Consequently, the Operation Iraqi Freedom, OIF, started in parallel to the Afghanistan War. Bush described this war as the clash between civilization and barbarism (Brewer, 2009, p.230). The “civilized” USA was fighting the “barbaric” Saddam Hussein in order to save USA from any possible future attacks.

However, after a year of war on Iraq, the once “enthusiastic” Americans found out that there were no weapons of mass destruction, and they had been deceived by their administration. Stories of golden toilets, golden guns and treasures found in the palaces of Saddam Hussein and his sons Uday and Cosey were revealed to the Americans (*The Guardian*, 2003, “The Tyrant’s Bathroom”), and they started to doubt their leaders’ ill will. Thus, the veterans who came back from Iraq wrote their own experience in the battlefield there, as they aimed to refute the official propaganda which embellished the causes of war.

This counter-propaganda found its echo in the American society, and people questioned their country's secret purposes, and the excuse of the "noble cause". Curtis D. Bennett (2016) writes a poem named "Harbingers" in which he mocks the leaders of the war whose falsification of the harsh events is obvious. Bennett writes that

The War President from America  
Mounts the podiums to prattle the virtues of war,  
Attempting to rewrite history, to deny war's reality,  
He exploits the moment for selfish means,  
To justify his war as a noble cause, ignoring its brutality,  
Thoughtlessly attempting to validate, substantiate, and authenticate,  
War's vicious crimes against civilization  
Turning the senseless slaughter of innocents  
Into a righteous cause, to be proud of and condone.  
Turning war into a sound-bite of empty words  
Of praise, blessing, glory, and accomplishment.  
(<https://search.app/tPUm2GfhjxLnLojV8>)

Similarly, Philips (2006) writes that the African Americans were not convinced with the war against Iraq or Afghanistan. In fact, because these people had already suffered from racism, unjustness, oppression and underestimation, [They] have questioned the moral and ethical reasons for the nation's use of such empowering military aggression to encourage democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have asked, what are America's real intentions? Why did the United States fail to stop genocide in Rwanda or make a vital difference in Haiti and Sudan? Through numerous blogs, African Americans have helped organize and sustain a virtual antiwar movement (p. 275).

The Western media tried to show that they also reject the idea of war in Iraq, but it was a shy try of documenting violence. To Segall (2008), "While western media are interested in blogs as a form of personal protest, not much is written on the identities of these bloggers, nor on the type of blogs that are being produced" (p.78).

However, what remains the truest and most honest documentation of the American war on Iraq are the words taken from the horse's mouth; that is from the soldiers who shared in the war, and were totally influenced by the miserable scenes and experiences. Those soldiers were mostly the sons of people who belonged to the working class. After a stealth bomber, Robert Minhinnick (2017) describes how people come out from the bunker and look for their beloveds' possessions under the crematorium ashes. It is a shocking poem that reports how the Amiriya bunker in Baghdad was destroyed by the American military forces on 13 February 1991. 400 civilians were killed. Using banned, chemical weapons is also portrayed in the poem;

All the bodies foaming like phosphorus

In a bunker in Iraq  
The old women  
Took off their shoes  
To welcome the fire that jumped into their mouths.  
How quickly the children  
Found themselves unborn  
“After the Stealth Bomber” ([https://youtu.be/j2\\_BWAt2SRQ?si=Osd3HHaghGYHRbD](https://youtu.be/j2_BWAt2SRQ?si=Osd3HHaghGYHRbD))

The US soldiers went to Iraq to free it from Saddam Husein, but they found out that it was not the real cause of war. In his poem, “Iraq”, Jason Shelton (2004) questions the cause, but he cannot find an answer:

As I travel through the sun baked sand,  
Rifle in hand, ready to repel.  
Why? Who? Why? ... WHEN?  
The children begging for food and water terror in their eyes  
*Are we the liberators or the new order?* (emphasis added)  
(<https://search.app/tPUm2GfhjxLnLojV8>)

Being the superpower in the world, USA is exempted from the international law, and no one could talk about the American injustice and violation of humanity. Thus, there is a devastating confusion among the soldiers whether to respond to the mottos of peace worldwide or to sympathize with

Four Iraqis at the gate  
All of them missing  
Their hands or their  
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx story  
Metres, “Sand Opera” (<https://search.app/tPUm2GfhjxLnLojV8>)

In *St Brides*, Jo Shapcott assures this confusion:

... I was born in a city  
To come and go safely through the boroughs,  
Carrying inside me every morning’s news: pictures  
Of soldiers in places they didn’t want  
To understand, made to fight for loose change,  
For the hell of it, for a can of oil. I live here,  
But the smell of print and ashes is in my nose.  
(<https://search.app/tPUm2GfhjxLnLojV8>)

Because Iraq had some of the largest oil reserves in the whole world, the American greed was triggered to eradicate the Iraqi regime regardless of the Iraqi price that was to be paid. After all, “making an omelette requires breaking some eggs,” as most of the American warmongers always said.

In *The Guardian* magazine, John Chapman (2004) writes about the real reasons that pushed Bush to war.

There were two credible reasons for invading Iraq: control over oil and preservation of the dollar as the world’s reserve currency. Yet the

government has kept silent on these factors... Saddam controlled a country at the center of the Gulf, a region with a quarter of world oil production in 2003, and containing more than 60% of the world's known reserves.

Nevertheless, not all soldiers participating in the war share the same sentiments to the Iraqi people. While a few consider Abu Ghraib an effective solution for rebellions, a lot tolerate with the poor civilians. It is a humanitarian issue that was engrossed in their memories for a long time. In fact, the military leaders do a very good job in training their soldiers to be emotionless, fearless and capable of accomplishing terrible tasks, like jumping from a helicopter, moving between landmines and slaughtering enemies. The only thing a soldier is trained to be cautious of is the “demonic” and “savage” enemy. However, their enemy was neither demonic nor savage. Prisons were a real scandal. Curtis Bennett (2016) writes about it:

The photos were painfully clear  
In color, and graphically detailed,  
In multi-pixel format  
From across the world.  
From another faraway land  
In another place, and time.  
They are undeniable, uncompromising,  
Painful to look at, hard to accept.

<https://search.app/tPUm2GfhjxLnLojV8>

Bennett moves his slide show from one scene of torture to another, revealing the savagery of the American soldiers who, in addition to Bush's reasons of war, have their own inhumane causes. Bennett continues:

These photos are a metaphor,  
Of what America considers Iraq,  
What do we think of the Iraqi people,  
Of our dominance, or our authority,  
Of our cruelty, and our brutality,  
Our inhumanity and callousness, with total disregard for other peoples  
Except ourselves and our priorities...

“Abu Ghraib” (<https://search.app/tPUm2GfhjxLnLojV8>)

After this Abu Ghraib torture scandal – which the media tried to veil, but was uncovered by some whistle-blowers, like Julian Assange's WikiLeaks – the Americans felt that they were very similar to those terrorists who attacked the Twin Towers in September 11.

Veterans who witnessed and participated in the war on Iraq suffered from severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “I can't do it again,” a soldier tells the examining physician. “I think I'll lose my mind” (qtd. in Buzzell, p. 212). These veterans were very aware of what they had committed, and this led to their

identity crisis. If they were the heroes, liberators and the peacemakers in the world, then how can they categorize their crimes?

Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi novelist, poet and activist against the American conquer of his homeland, considers that “the networks of force are traced in the blood of innocent Iraqis who suffer the ultimate – and final – loss of agency” (qtd. in Peebles 2011, p.46). In “To an Iraqi Infant”, Antoon asks:

Do you know  
That your tomorrow  
Has no tomorrow?  
That your blood  
Is the ink  
Of new maps? (qtd. in Peebles, 2011, p.46).

In the end, these veterans realize that the profits of wars were connected with their leaders’ interests. They were not fighting for the sake of spreading worldwide peace, or saving USA from foreseen evils, but rather killing innocent people for the sake of geography, gold and oil.

In a poem “We didn’t need a Foe”, Dave Nottingham (2016) summarizes the savagery of wars, and the meaningless, inhumane excuses of the politicians who are sending their soldiers to die for oil.

I had to watch my babies, committed to a grave  
Whilst Bush tells us he has the world to save  
And as we fall, one by one, upon our land, our sovereign soil  
We ask, “Are our lives really worth so much less than oil?”  
([https:// search.app/ c1H7pAZcj5BL2fJJ6](https://search.app/c1H7pAZcj5BL2fJJ6))

Similarly, the poems of Curtis Bennett (2016), who was a former US pilot on active service in Vietnam, are a good example of the futility of wars. In his poem “Iraq Legacy”, Bennett writes.

One day we will look back and realize,  
Our kids all died.... for nothing.  
(<https://search.app/tPUm2GfhjxLnLojV8>)

### **Conclusion**

*“O peace! How many wars were waged in thy name”* Alexander Pope

The American war poetry which flourished after Vietnam War was considered antiwar. “In a vital and egalitarian cornucopia of styles and voices, the poems were anti-imperialist, and they rejected ... [the] well-known formulation of war as an extension of diplomacy by other means” (Goldensohn, 2006, p. 286). Moreover, those soldiers, who participated in the American successive wars, presented themselves as both victims and victimizers at the same time; victims of their leaders’ greedy policies, and victimizers of the innocent civilians all around Middle East, and Indochina. That was the cause of losing confidence and trust in leaders, so we find that there are enormous amounts of war poetry where “soldiers turn to one another, a chain of dependent brothers facing death”



(Goldensohn, 2006, p. 288). The same feeling was sensed during the war on Iraq. “Although the government would prefer to portray war as ‘clinical and compassionate’, online videos [and poems] can reveal U.S. soldiers participating in seemingly indiscriminate violence against Iraqis, verbally abusing Iraqi children, or physically abusing animals, all of which have caused public outrage” (Peebles, 2011, p. 11).

Thus, the poems and stories of the American soldiers unveiled the true intentions of the larger institution of dominating the oil and empowering of the currency rather than spreading peace worldwide. This awakening of the Americans after the war on Iraq is revealed in their poetry; David Roberts (2016) writes:

The true international community,  
The five billion people of the Earth  
Who are not the President of the United States of America  
Could easily resist  
His power  
And would do  
If it had the organized resolve  
And will do in time  
(<https://search.app/89KH7sUCc8pcSj6H8>)

In an article published in Proletarian Revolution (2003), the writer writes hints about the American awakening

Even in a “volunteer army,” the disenchantment could end up far greater, once soldiers recognize that the Iraqi population views them as killers and conquerors, not the “liberators” promised by Bush and Cheney. Two British soldiers in Iraq have already refused to fight, on the grounds that the war requires the killing of innocent civilians. When we stand for the defeat of the U.S. side in the war, we take no satisfaction in the slaughter of working-class soldiers subjected to military servitude. It is the ruling class that is sending them to kill and die. But they too will have to learn that their rulers and officers are their enemy, just as their bosses and foremen are the enemies of workers’ struggles everywhere—as their forerunners did during the Vietnam War.

The American soldiers recognized that the war was not just a big mistake, but something immoral and inhumane, and this terrifying reality provoked a profound national identity crisis, an American reckoning. The war altered the soldiers’, as well as the Americans’ perception of their national and exceptional identity. A soldier who chooses to participate in the war, “propelled by idealism, and scarred irrevocably by what he sees, becomes a disaffiliated anarchist or radical afterwards” (Walsh, 1982, p.5). All the inherited ideals, and the mythical identity of a hero contradicted with the war scenario. In fact, what the leaders aimed at before the war was crushed after years of unfair war. The soldiers’ written words played an important in revealing the truth.

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