

COMMENTARY BY CLAUDIA HONEYWELL

Philoctetes in Iraq

Filkins, Dexter. *The Forever War*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009.

Jaffe, Greg, and David Cloud. *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2010.

In *The Forever War*, Dexter Filkins introduces us to Lt Col Nathan Sassaman, an American officer in Iraq who so exemplifies the virtues of hard work that “he slept in his boots.” Sassaman came from upright stock and had upright credentials, “the son of a Methodist minister and a graduate of West Point.” In the early days after the invasion of Iraq, Sassaman emerges in Filkins’ eyes as “the most impressive American field commander in Iraq.”

Standing upright has far more than biological significance. Upright posture is the mark not just of the Sassaman’s physical readiness but his integrity as well. Filkins describes an officer who keeps his back straight, his head up and his eyes forward; an officer who exemplifies the physical and moral foundation of a soldier’s basic training.

Our upright posture is a physiological wonder. While four-footed animals will draw themselves upright to scan their surroundings, we humans rise from our

beds each morning to walk upright throughout our days. Walking upright is a risky business. Each step we take is a controlled fall and only the swinging forward and planting of our second foot keeps us from falling flat on our faces. Upright posture requires energy. If you want to make a good impression you have to stand up straight.

Sassaman, who begins as the model of the upright military officer, meets his fall in Balad and Samarra, Iraq during the winter of 2003. At first successful in holding elections in Shiite Balad, Sassaman's unit is caught off guard by the burgeoning Sunni insurgency and spirals into the cycle where dialogue fails to placate the extremists and crackdowns only inflame the violence.

Such circumstances in which "the Americans were making enemies faster than they could kill them" negated the returns that Sassaman had come to expect as the just rewards for his rigid, ingrained Christian virtues. In the escalating insurgency "the preacher's son saw his generosity go unrewarded, saw his good works blown up and painted with graffiti... Over time, when Sassaman went into the countryside, he began to slough off the virtues that had paid such dividends inside the Shiite city of Balad."

The path from virtue to violence is a common theme in Greek tragedy. Think Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*, a character who begins with the good intention of maintaining order in Thebes but under the pressure of internal rebellion issues the hubristic and unethical order to leave the body of his nephew Polyneices unburied. Lt Col Sassaman and the men he commands respond to the escalating violence with their own escalating callousness, a consequence of Sassaman's failed attempts to negotiate with the Sunni sheikhs. In Filkins' portrayal, this hardened, post-diplomatic commander displays a previously unacknowledged appetite for violence: "Come back in a couple of weeks," he said. He smiled as he spoke. His eyes were glowing. "We are going to inflict extreme violence." Violence fosters in Sassaman's unit a new lack of respect for the Iraqis that betokens for Sassaman a corresponding loss of self-awareness: "The only thing they understand is force—force, pride and saving face." As Sophocles' Creon turns on those he had trusted, Sassaman comes to suspect all Iraqis of participating in a conspiracy against law and order.

Sassaman describes his circumstances as "incredibly unfair." When he honored his diplomatic agreements, the insurgents took advantage of him: "As Sassaman had promised, he had scaled back the number of patrols in the Sunni countryside. The insurgents had used the pause to organize and step up their attacks." Trained to use force should diplomacy fail, Sassaman cannot make headway with either

strategy. Sassaman soon trusts no one outside his unit and protects his own men at all costs.

In *The Fourth Star*, David Cloud and Greg Jaffe introduce Col Michael Steele as a “barrel-chested former offensive lineman on the University of Georgia national championship football team.” Steele leaves Fort Campbell for Iraq with his aptitude for violence already fully developed: “Anytime you fight—anytime you fight—you always kill the other son of a bitch,” he said, pacing back and forth like Patton. “You are the hunter, the predator—you are looking for the prey.” After Steele’s men killed four Iraqi civilians on an island in the Tigris,

they swore to investigators that Steele had instructed them to kill all military-age males on the island.... The investigation ultimately concluded that Steele had led his soldiers to believe that distinguishing combatants from noncombatants—a main tenet of the military’s rules of engagement—wasn’t necessary during the mission.

After receiving the letter of reprimand that ended his career, Steele slumped on the marble steps of the Al Faw Palace, “his head in his hands.”

Sassaman is encouraged by a similar chain of command to “experiment” with nonlethal violence. During an investigation of the alleged drowning of an Iraqi man who was forced by Sassaman’s men to jump into the Tigris, “Sassaman ordered his men to lie... I told my guys to tell them about everything—everything except the water.” The investigation puts an end to Sassaman’s military career.

A physical injury that results in the loss of upright posture affects the whole community. Christopher Reeve’s accident left the world stunned that Superman would never stand upright again. When Chinese gymnast Sang Lan was paralyzed at the 1998 Goodwill Games, she apologized to her country for her weakness in not being able to get up and walk off the mats on her own. If physical paralysis is so profound, what happens when the wound cripples not our body but our integrity?

Sophocles wrote a tragedy about this very question, the *Philoctetes*. Philoctetes is a Greek hero who was abandoned on a deserted island by his comrades on their way to the Trojan War because they found his incurable foot wound so difficult to accept. Left alone on the island for ten years, Philoctetes moves around by dragging himself along on the ground, leaving not footprints but a trail. He stays alive by using the bow he inherited from Hercules to shoot down birds from a supine position.

Philoctetes is hardly an innocent. His foot wound is the result of an act of impiety, he tread arrogantly on forbidden sacred ground. Still, the animalistic conditions of his life on the island make any audience shudder. Philoctetes is a scapegoat. He is the one chosen to bear the burden of guilt for the cumulative inhumanity of those who abandoned him.

As the play opens, Odysseus is on his way to the island with Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, to bring Philoctetes and his famous bow back to Troy, for the Greeks have received a prophecy that they will not conquer Troy without him. Odysseus predicts Philoctetes' outrage and persuades Neoptolemus, the "son of a noble father," to win Philoctetes' confidence by relating a false story about Neoptolemus' own grievances against the Greeks. Odysseus persuades Neoptolemus that the ends outweigh the means: "Let us be honest at another time; for now, for a brief shameless part of the day, give me yourself...." For Neoptolemus, the lie is justified because it is in the service of the Greek mission at Troy. Neoptolemus is quick to exclude from his moral sphere those 'others', like Philoctetes, who are not part of his own mission unit.

Sassaman comes early in his mission to accept that "a brief shameless part of the day" is the only way to continue to function in Iraq: "It's like Jekyll and Hyde out here.... By day, we are putting on a happy face. By night, we are hunting down and killing our enemies."

Although Neoptolemus plans to resort to a lie, when he meets Philoctetes he has a change of heart. Face to face, Neoptolemus sees Philoctetes as a fellow human being with a pitiable wound. Neoptolemus condemns his falsehood and regains his commitment to truth.

Until this point in the play, Philoctetes' foot wound has been a physical injury. Now Philoctetes' loss of upright posture begins to manifest a more sinister and symbolic meaning. Although Neoptolemus attempts to maintain Philoctetes' trust, he is soon exasperated by Philoctetes' relentless self-pity. Rejoining the Greek mission would mean a cure, and yet Philoctetes refuses to consider the offer. Torn between his former sympathy and his growing disgust, Neoptolemus tries to use his friendship with Philoctetes to persuade the hero to go willingly to Troy. Throughout Neoptolemus' attempts to find and do the right thing, Philoctetes dwells incessantly on the unfairness of his situation and on his inability to forgive everyone who abandoned him. Sophocles' play is stalled without resolution and without catharsis.

Sassaman has reason to bear a grudge. Although the investigation was conducted by Americans, the army investigators are biased: "I personally believed that the

whole chain of command was lying to me,” one investigator later said. Sassaman sees only the irony of the investigation: “You know what’s strange?... Two Iraqis out after curfew, in a town like Samarra? They could have killed those guys, and they would have gotten medals.”

Neoptolemus’ ability to view his former ‘enemy’ with compassion is a necessary component of Sophocles’ resolution but it will not be sufficient until Philoctetes can surrender his grievances and accept a cure. Philoctetes’ unwavering conviction that he is a victim of circumstance leads to Neoptolemus’ strongest condemnation: “You have become an animal.” The cure that would restore upright posture to Philoctetes requires him to let go of his grudge.

In *The Forever War*, everyone suffers: “Everything was like that in Iraq. Anything anyone ever tried burned to black.” Sassaman and his men dehumanize the Iraqi people in not so subtle ways: “I feel bad for these people, I really do,” one of Sassaman’s men reflects. “It’s so hard to separate the good from the bad.” Although he questions the Iraqis’ humanity, it is Sassaman’s humanity that is in question here.

Philoctetes’ restoration to the human world now depends on him surrendering his deepest grievances. The deserted island where Philoctetes drags himself along the ground now represents the moral boundary between human and animal. Left to himself, Philoctetes will never leave, he will give up his chance to walk upright again.

In Sophocles’ play, the deified Heracles comes to the rescue and orders Philoctetes to do what he cannot do by himself. Thanks to this *deus ex machina*, there will be a cure not just for Philoctetes’ personal wound but for the Trojan War that has gone on ‘forever’.

When we leave Sassaman, he still cannot connect his experience to that of the Iraqis he went to help. Can we offer him a cure? The success of our military’s mission might depend on it. What would it take for those like Sassaman to accept a cure and choose to walk upright again? Every step we take is a controlled fall. Unless our second foot swings forward and takes our weight, we will stumble. Filkins entitles his Sassaman chapter “The Man Within,” pointing to the potential for violence within us all. Animals do not walk upright. Only a human being can choose to live in upright posture.

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