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Ridiculous Impingements of Normalcy: Home Fronts, Good Soldiers, War Correspondents

In a well-known moment from the penultimate section of his Vietnam memoir *Dispatches* (1977)—the part of the book entitled, with mock-professional formality, “Colleagues”—Michael Herr sets his theme by calling up a virtually iconic representation of the American war correspondent. He invokes a scene from what elsewhere he calls his own “personal movie,” a series of fantasies partly taking their cues from World War II combat films:

There's a candle end burning in a corner of the bunker, held to the top of a steel helmet by melted wax, the light guttering over a battered typewriter, and the Old Guy is getting one off: "Tat-tat-tat, tatta-tatta-tat like your kid or your brother or your sweetheart maybe never wanted much for himself never asked for anything except for what he knew to be his some men have a name for it and they call it Courage when the great guns are still at last across Europe what will it matter maybe after all that this one boy from Cleveland Ohio won't be coming back-a-tat-tat." You can hear shellfire landing just outside, a little gravel falls into the typewriter, but the candle burns on, throwing its faint light over the bowed head and the few remaining wisps of white hair. Two men, the Colonel and the Kid, stand by the door watching. "Why, Sir?" the Kid asks. "What makes him do it? He could be sitting safe in

London right now. "I don't know, son," the Colonel says. "Maybe he figures he's got a job to do, too. Maybe it's because he's somebody who really cares...."
(187)

As Maggie Gordon and others have observed, scenes like this could easily have been clipped from an actual film script. Indeed, when I first encountered this particular passage in the late 1970s, it seemed so highly stylized that I read it as a parody of the journalistic tradition in which Herr found himself. With its central figure of the typewriter-tapping reporter, unquestioningly affirming the purpose of the "Good War," surrounded by movie types straight out of central casting—well, it all seemed disastrously out of synch with Herr's own historical moment. But there was no mistaking the figure Herr had conjured up: it was Ernie Pyle.

These days, however, I tend to regard my first reaction both as an incomplete reading of Herr and an oversimplification of the legacy we might actually find in Pyle's own writings. That is, on the one hand, as I read Herr's passage now, it seems to me to capture the particularly vexing predicament of war correspondents, who often must construct their own sense of (or fantasies about) their professional "duty" while surrounded by soldiers who have little choice about enacting theirs. On the other, it is also hard to overlook the potentially withering critique suggested by Herr's scene: that the boilerplate dispatch Pyle had made his trademark, the homiletic to the "normal," small-town, usually Midwestern "boys" just doing their duty, might simply be a way of downplaying the violence, psychological chaos, and political meanings of the modern, technologically-saturated war zone. What would the volunteer spirit of the Old Guy in Herr's personal movie really say, for example, to or about troops who had been drafted?—and more to the point, into a war where, as in Vietnam, there was hardly an unquestioning devotion to the mission? Moreover, would it really be possible for Pyle's formula to suit our contemporary era?—a time, after all, not of nation-wide commitments to total war, but of so-called "limited" conflicts or "police actions" engaged by professional armies and even private security forces—and where the signature genre of Pyle's oeuvre, the letter that weaved its way home from the front, is now but a satellite dish away?

These are, of course, large questions. But even to begin to answer some of them, we would do well to revisit Ernie Pyle's World War II columns, and the literary, rhetorical, and cultural work we might find there. I want to begin, therefore, by reexamining a legacy I think we do, in fact, too often treat as "legendary" to the point of being antique. Then, to explore the relevance of Pyle's approach for today,

the thinkers cited above suggest, the challenge for liberal societies like the U.S. has often been to construct a framework of political obligation that does not jeopardize the democratic soldier's belief that he or she is, above all, a consenting free, rights-bearing citizen. Wartime, in essence, reverses the traditional liberal social contract: having pledged "above all, to protect individual life and liberty and advance the pursuit of private happiness" the nation-state now asks the citizen to risk his or her life to defend it (Westbrook 29). Indeed, especially when liberal societies entreat a private citizen to combat foreign fighters of more authoritarian, illiberal, and religiously-motivated movements or states, standard propagandizing is often not up to the task. And as a result, national leaders tend to invoke the idea that such enemies pose threats to the putatively more open, liberal (or American) "way of life," thereby enlisting the more ordinary, improvisational rationales that citizens, soldiers, and even reporters often use to understand the obligations of military service: likening war, for example, to defending one's neighborhood or wife or children. Even military strategy itself can attempt to enlist these ordinary ways of understanding, thus compelling terms of consent to shuttle back and forth between war and home fronts in telling ways.

In each of my first two sections in following, therefore, I will focus on the full battery of ordinary cultural vocabularies that Pyle and Finkel, respectively, posit as central to political obligation in their particular moment: Pyle in his post-New Deal renderings of war production at home and on European battlefronts; Finkel, in depicting a post-9/11 counterinsurgency campaign in the Middle East. Along the way, I will also explore how the particular literary forms chosen by these two war correspondents intersect with their rendering of, and participation in, the cultural fashioning of political obligation. And in closing, I will turn to some of the enduring problems that may be inherent in deploying what we might call the Pyle paradigm, in "good" wars and not.

(I)

Admittedly, it might surprise some—historians of American journalism in particular—that Pyle's corpus bears yet another reexamination. Starting in the 1980s, a new generation of biographically-based scholarship tried to supplant the popular idea that Pyle's fame had derived simply from his cracker-barrel, Hoosier-style philosophizing and uncritical patriotism. Rather, following up on the insights of Pyle's literary contemporaries like Randall Jarrell and A.J. Liebling, scholars such as David Randall, David Nichols, and James Tobin argued that Pyle had

forged a democratic compact with his readers and his soldier subjects through a combination of testimonial, human-interest journalism, plain-speaking moral realism, and documentary-like accuracy.² Primarily, his new interpreters argued, Pyle's columns brought together the front and the home front. As Nichols saw, for example, Pyle not only supplemented the more typical frontline news coverage that covered dramatic battles (but usually not individual fighting men themselves); the reporter also crafted columns that were much like letters *from* those same men that, if written *by* them, could have been censored or very late in arriving home.³ Thus Pyle's enormous popularity—he was read in some fourteen million homes at the height of the war—came to seem as if it ratified something like a democratic plebiscite. Thus, for instance, Harry Truman's praise, announcing Pyle's death to the nation: "No man in this war has so well told the story of American fighting man as the American fighting men wanted it told" (qtd. in Ritchie 225).

These new scholarly contributions were invaluable—I will rely on them myself in what follows. And yet, as the somewhat redundant logic of the Truman epitaph suggests, it remains unclear how much interpretive space this new scholarship really opened up, distinct from the image crafted by Pyle's popular iconography and from the enduring mystique of the so-called Good War. Ironically, the persisting image of Pyle as a Truman-style regular guy continued to eclipse what much of what new biographical revelations had actually shown: that he began World War II with a decidedly more urbane, cosmopolitan outlook than many of his middle or lower-class soldier-subjects; that he was older and more literarily-inclined; and he did not share an idealized vision of the suburban home front to fall back on, that so many of them did. (His wife, in fact, had been a pacifist going into the war.)

This new scholarship also showed us how, in Ernie Pyle, we encounter the all-too-rare instance of a journalist whose craft was elevated to something like a popular art. Apprenticing in aviation and then travel journalism, Pyle had carefully crafted the persona of a self-effacing, slightly Chaplinesque little guy pestered by small inconveniences and yet driven by grand dreams. In turn, he gradually developed a wartime style that would shift gears between panoramic vistas of the high, transcendent cause of the war and miniatures of the mundane realities of the trenches and foxholes: thumbnail biographies of individual soldiers, profiles of specialized troop divisions, explanations of everyday combat, all full idiosyncratic details that reassured home readers of the "continuity of small things" (Tobin 87) at the front. Additionally, the fact that Pyle's columns came to appear in *Stars and Stripes* meant that his soldiers were both news subjects and news readers: "[w]hile stateside readers read about the boys overseas, the boys overseas read about

themselves”(Nichols, *Ernie’s America* xiv). As was attested by his own *actual* personal movie, William Wellman’s *Ernie Pyle’s Story of G.I. Joe* (1945), Pyle’s acceptance among the troops was probably facilitated by this double-layer of readership. Soldiers knew him by reputation, read his stories as he wrote them, and looked for themselves or their comrades in his columns.

Well before Wellman’s film, of course, Pyle’s columns fashioned the self-image of a correspondent so intent upon his reporting duty that it became virtually equivalent to the obligations of the soldiers he wrote about. In his North African and European war-theatre columns for Scripps-Howard, he is explicitly dutiful about reciting, and then enacting, what he interprets as his audience’s sense of his public function.⁴ That is, Pyle willingly enlists in a series of tasks: picturing the war, measuring the morale of the troops (and even captured Germans), and translating command strategy and foot soldier experience back to the home front. He will enumerate three things “you folks at home should know” (61); he breaks the Normandy and post-Normandy strategy down to Five Phases (328), and then compares it to building a house. Even military censorship (and his own willing self-censorship) about specific troop locations and movements, far from being a hindrance to his efforts, actually contributed to Pyle’s sense of being inside something great, providing a private view of events otherwise obscured from his audience. Admitting outright to his readers that he was not always allowed to identify the unit he travelled with (115), Pyle would tell readers things like “I wish I could tell you what the password was. You would think it very funny” (61). Even the mysterious “SOMEWHERE IN ...” dateline, rather than reflecting his columns’ censorship, conveyed the aura of a writer inside a plan, and unwilling to give any comfort to the enemy. U.S. audiences (who might learn, in contrast, the street addresses of individual soldiers from Pyle’s columns) were thus culled together into what Benedict Anderson and others liken to a national reading community.

The byplay between front and home front, meanwhile, was something that Pyle not only treated thematically; it was embedded in the rhetorical “address” of his work, in multiple senses of that word. For example, Pyle’s preferred to use direct address, a “you” that worked variously to speak to a reader, as an implicit first person (for Pyle himself), and as a generic term for troop experience as a whole. He could offer ardent, unabashed admiration: “God,” he wrote after Normandy, “how you admired those men up there and were sickened for the ones who fell” (334). Or, he could shift into immediate, subjective immersion: “It’s just that on some nights the air becomes sick and there is an unspoken contagion of spiritual dread, and you are little boys again, lost in the dark” (108-9). Moreover, Pyle reinforced readerly

involvement by telling his audiences that “home”—meaning, usually, a specific regional and domestic locale with “normal,” everyday, household concerns—was what animated the thoughts of soldiers. The idea, he said, permeated the very language of the men:

That’s the way conversation at the front goes all the time. Ten minutes hardly ever goes by without some nostalgic reference to home, how long you’ve been away, how long before you get back, what you’ll do first when you hit the States, what your chances are for returning before the war is over. (181)

Not surprisingly, letters from Pyle’s readers, of all social ranks, suggested they felt a reciprocal, intimate bond with his column rather than just a political affiliation with the war’s more idealistic rhetoric. “Ernie’s” fans sent *him* clippings from home, home remedy medicines, care packages, requests to look in on their sons, husbands, boyfriends. “To the writers of these letters,” Tobin tells us, “Ernie seemed a ubiquitous spirit . . . always within a stone’s throw of their beloved soldiers, always able to peek in their tents to see they were safe” (98).

All that being said, Pyle’s evocation of the home front was, necessarily, a more nuanced, literary balancing act than our current, largely journalistic approach suggests. For one thing, Pyle looks like he is invoking individual men’s *memories* in the passage above, but that’s probably not entirely the case. As Westbrook shows (56-7), the World War II construction of “fighting for the family” played as much upon dreams troops held of a postwar suburban reward for their sacrifice (cf. Nichols, *Ernie’s War* 13). Meanwhile, the exchange with soldiers involved more than a simple assertion of democratic identification. Take, for starters, Pyle’s signature use of the diminutive “boys.” However common a colloquialism of his moment, the label did anything but simple cultural work; it did not, for instance, simply masculinize battle or national service. In fact, in one column, Pyle refers to “the boys” as natural housewives (74). And that was because the term also worked paternalistically, reflecting again Pyle’s older age, something quite visible in *The Story of G.I. Joe*. Even more to the point, as the letters cited above suggest, the term conveyed affection, as if Pyle was being delegated as a surrogate provider of the care and oversight that soldiers might have ideally received at home. Home is not cordoned off by Pyle’s cultural work; it is carried *into* the front.

Nor could Pyle’s broader reconstruction of political obligation always be as simple as giving voice to an uncritical, sentimental nostalgia for home. For one thing, as

Elizabeth Samet incisively writes in regard to the Civil War, to suggest that home is the central preoccupation of soldiers is to risk leaving the impression that thoughts of desertion are there as well. To suggest that men missed home might also be damaging to their own morale. And as I've said, in a liberal democracy, implying an excessive passion for liberty or self-determination or even private property (one's home) might, paradoxically, broach the suggestion that American men were fundamentally unsuited for military service to a nation-state. Especially to call up home in, say, its nineteenth-century sentimental sense, as with Pyle's comparison to housewives, was to risk casting *too strong* an aura of dependency on them: a need for domestic care that might undermine their image of battle-readiness. Pyle was, for instance, was quite aware of how readers at home—and, intriguingly, allies on the ground who had seen the German enemy, especially those elite officers imbued with Nazi propaganda—might ask how American notions of freedom and personal happiness could make for disciplined soldiering. "They [Algerian locals who had seen Germans] can't conceive of the fact," he wrote, "that our strength lies in our freedom" (68).

The key point, I think, is that our notion of "home" itself needs a wider scope than even our best scholarship on Pyle recognizes. For instance, we have long known that Pyle emphasized how his "boys" were coarsened and professionalized (82), made into soldier-citizens by war experience itself. But this was because he wanted, especially, to separate soldiers' loneliness from more literal associations (that is, home-sickness), and emphasize instead such feelings of isolation were created by the soldiers' sense that the home front didn't "really feel" (364) what they were going through. Though sometimes mistaken for an uncritical jingoist, Pyle actually sets himself up *against* the "extreme optimism" (65) about the war that he sensed at home, saying that soldiers themselves "can't stomach flag-waving back home" that is too "gooey" or "mushily patriotic" (205). After a victory in Tunis, for example, he warned readers even though men were battle-hardened, the worst was yet to come. ("Don't be impatient," he warned the home front [288]: building a house takes time). Then, to capture the often Spartan, miserable, makeshift existence of the infantryman, Pyle made use of what I have elsewhere called the "just folks" idioms of early twentieth century middlebrow literature: the American literary vernacular that, while *seeming* to evoke Midwestern or middle-American stateside verities, actually centered on the dignity of blue and white collar labor. That is, on reaffirming the discipline of work values. Inflected by masculine norms, always investing in the fellowship of common labor, "just folks" vocabularies underscored any individual's "American" typicality, and then suggested he mostly wanted to

be left alone by governments and parades and excessive emotions. In short, he wanted to stick his nose to the grindstone, and just to do—here was the just-folks keyword—his “job.”

War therefore coarsened the men, made boys into killers, but in so doing it brought out this populist quintessence. It was a kind of reduction to original form brought on by the scarcities that all those letters from home wanted to redress:

Corp. Richard Kelso . . . apprenticed in Belfast as a machinist . . . He went to America when he was twenty-five and now he is forty-five. . . .

. . . [He] doesn't have to be over here at all . . .

He too sleeps on the ground and work sixteen hours a day, and is happy to do it—for boys who are dying are not three thousand miles away and abstract; they are ten miles away and very, very real. (326-327)

[Pfc. Tommy] Clayton has worked at all kinds of things back in that other world of civilian life. He has been a farmhand, a cook and a bartender. . . .

When the war is over he wants to go into business for himself . . . He'll probably set up a small restaurant in Evansville. . . .

And soldiers like Tommy Clayton go back to [war's horrors], because they are good soldiers and they have a duty they cannot define. (344-47)

This scaling down, the acknowledging of the sheer pettiness of survival at the front—what Pyle called the “ridiculous impingement of normalcy on a field of battle” (95)—dovetailed with his evocation of a generic typicality: at the front, men were individuals, but they were also expressive of the democratic reverence for simple labor, keeping to oneself, honoring one's duty not in the abstract but in the local and particular.

This way, the domestic impulse was transposed into a collective soldier-citizen idiom. On the one hand, pointing to the homey touches in foxholes, Pyle would write, “I'll bet there's not another army in the world that fixes itself a ‘home away from home’ as quickly as ours does” (74-75). But into that home, Pyle interjects disciplined work, often the specialization of labor that, linked to men in battle, breeds fellowship, the binding together of the job. In many ways, this was a Popular Front in its central iconography, similar to that invoked in his travel columns. (This is also why the seemingly volunteerist Pyle actually supported Franklin Roosevelt's idea of legislation requiring national service [364]). Characteristically, Pyle used his

downshifting of scale, and his capsule biographies, to break what he called the “great war machine” (318) down into component parts, much like panels in a Depression-era mural. When held back from the actual front, for instance, he made a virtue of the long-standing journalistic strategy of camp following, and profiled the artillery support groups or ordinance supply units or even flyboys who supplemented the efforts of their fellow infantrymen. That is, he helped his audience picture what a particular job was—and, quite tellingly, Pyle’s persona shifted from a “you” to a “we” to refer variously to himself, to the unit being profiled, and to the reader at home. This is the very function he attributed *to* the labor of war: to bond different divisions together. Spartan scarcity and collaborative labor brought with them the respite of a kind of forgetfulness, a loss of oneself in duty. In this re-imagined space, even killing became a profession (104), a job.

And this built logically, in the sequential lesson plan laid out for his home front readers, into a final signature of Pyle’s work: his evocation of a war effort behind the front that was actually *at* it. Or, more precisely, just behind it. Pyle asked his reader at home to picture various forms of labor within the war machine because they doubled as examples of a war production ethos that might be imitated at home. Take these selections from a column entitled “The Fixers,” which starts by alternately drawing the dividing line with home and then erasing it. It’s worth noticing, as well, how Pyle’s casting mixes differences in age with his fundamental divide:

SOMEWHERE IN NORMANDY, AUGUST 1, 1944—I know of nothing in civilian life at home by which you can even remotely compare the contribution to his country made by the infantry soldier . . .

But I’ve just been with an outfit whose war work is similar enough to yours that I believe you can see the difference . . .

These men are skilled craftsmen. Many of them are above military age. Back home they made big money. Their jobs here are fundamentally the same as those of you who work at home work in war plants. . . .

You have beds and bathrooms. These men sleep on the ground, and dig a trench for their toilets. (325-26)

Likewise, one of the soldiers who provide rifles for paratroopers testifies: “Them old boys at the front I’m sure got my sympathy. Least we can do is work our fingers off to give them the stuff” (320). He becomes a war producer, as if behind the front.

Simple, prosaic, this labor has so allowed him to lose himself that he has forgotten he is at the front; in other words, he has found a home there.

(II)

Based on over eighteen months spent with an infantry battalion (the “2-16” from Fort Riley, Kansas) in the late phases of the war in Iraq, David Finkel’s *The Good Soldiers* at first seems worlds apart from Pyle’s Good War dispatches—politically, technologically, aesthetically. And little wonder. Although once again engaged by a volunteer army, the battle for Iraq was not a total campaign demanding a national commitment to wartime production on the home front. Rather, it was framed as a so-called “limited” counterinsurgency effort that dragged on despite deep skepticism in the American voting public.⁵ The mission also proved quite mutable: supposedly about Weapons of Mass Destruction (or, some quarters, responding to 9/11), it morphed into the cause of liberating Iraqis from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein; then, it morphed again, as I will show, into providing security for the task of nation-building at which the war’s originators had originally scoffed (cf. Stark). Fighting an elusive, even nebulous enemy, U.S. soldiers commonly found themselves surrounded not by a grateful liberated populace, but a world of fear, distrust, and the charge that they were little more than a force of military occupation. (“Suspicion in 360 degrees,” Finkel calls it [40].) It turns out, however, that these new historical and political conditions—including the official and ordinary components with which political obligation was forged—proved just as vital to Finkel’s story-telling as World War II’s had been to Pyle’s. Where Pyle used his stateside experience to construct a redeeming panorama of homely labor and regenerative national unity in war, Finkel explores the tensions generated both by the 2-16’s visits home and, paradoxically, their efforts to build safe streets so far away from those homes. The mission of counterinsurgency enters into their vocabularies of political obligation, in ways often disastrous for the men.

In *The Good Soldiers* we do encounter a different literary form. Finkel’s retrospective, book-length narrative forgoes Pyle’s trademark letter-dispatches for the battery of devices from contemporary literary journalism: third person omniscience (no Pyle persona here); the interpolation of individual consciousness into that narrator’s free indirect discourse; powerful telescoping between present and future time frames. The book is organized around the consciousness of the 2-16’s leader, a Montana-born U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel named Ralph Kauzlarich, whom the soldiers come to call “The Lost Kauz” (123). With nicknames

like that, we not surprisingly encounter post-Vietnam gaps of credibility and command throughout. Each of Finkel's chapters is keyed to a specific calendar date, yet introduced by a windy or obtuse epigraph from President George W. Bush, so that we can measure its reality, or usually its opposite, on the ground. In turn, Finkel's back-and-forth shuttling between Kauzlarich's ambitions and the men's despair allows his story to foreshadow those elements that, on page one, we are told "weren't yet" (1) at hand: distrust, injury, disillusionment, death. The book thus partly refashions its own journalistic datelining: punctuated by a relentless pulse of injury and fatality, *The Good Soldiers* instead becomes the "Death March" the men's gallows humor predicts (18). Over time, even Kauzlarich's own struggles become apparent when, like a church elder, he begins to preach a jeremiad of inevitable death to the younger generation under his command.⁶ The chapter calendar generates a countdown effect that soon establishes getting home as getting out. Thus, as well, the implied argument that emerges to challenge the much-ballyhooed success of the surge strategy (243-245). The real reason for the only momentary pause in fighting in that year, Finkel argues, was the arbitrary decision of Muqtada al-Sadr's militia to sit back and wait for a better time, which ominously begins at the end of *The Good Soldiers* (267, 279).

Because of that outcome, some may come to read *The Good Soldiers* as an anti-war book. Read that way, Finkel's title might simply seem an ironic commentary on those public efforts, notably on the political right, to liken Iraq to World War II: Saddam Hussein to Adolph Hitler, Al-Qaeda to the opening salvo of "Islamofascism," and so on. (New wars, as Amy Kaplan has reminded us, often must rewrite old ones.) But Finkel's goal is, I think, far less polemical. Really, he is more intent on fragmenting the war what he calls into multiple "versions" or "realities" (81, 103, 132) that often track centrifugally from the blast zones of I.E.D.'s and "lobbed bombs." If, for instance, Kauzlarich's command comes to seem like a bizarre materialization of Bush's own psychological denial, the Colonel too is victimized by his superiors. General David Petraeus, the intellectual godfather of the new counterinsurgency strategy, actually arrives in person for a consultation, only to ignore all the bad news (152-56). Finkel, meanwhile, also uses the men's sworn statements from mission or patrol disasters to enhance our sense of the fragmentation of the war's realities. The keyword of Finkel's title, the word "good" is itself shattered into different meanings: at points it refers to morally righteous or pure of heart; later, to being merely proficient at one's job; elsewhere, merely passable. Most of all, it comes to stand for an inability to process the unimaginable terrors on the ground ("It's all good," Kauzlarich says compulsively.)

Meanwhile, Finkel's book cannot help but look over its shoulder at Pyle's legacy, new historical conditions or its political intentions notwithstanding. For one thing, not only does Finkel's writing, like Pyle's, center on putatively typical, mid-American soldiers from Montana or Wyoming or Ohio; at one point we hear about a nineteen-year-old fighter who just weeks before had been "hollering in some Kansas snow" (24-25). We are also tied, as with Pyle, to an older, paternal consciousness focalized via Kauzlarich himself. Finkel's choice to center on Kauzlarich itself ends up smuggling into the book a backward glance, since the Colonel himself nostalgically defines "real" military work in World War II's terms of directly engaging the enemy (5). At any point that Kauzlarich is returned to battle, he sees it as "[m]eaning restored" (11). This longing also reflects the way *The Good Soldiers* itself returns us, as the Pyle paradigm would have it, to the on-the-ground, immediate perimeter of infantrymen and their hopes and fears. We might even say that this very perimeter becomes Finkel's own narrative "good." Whenever we read one of Bush's grand rationales, for example, or hear about the superficial metrics of think tanks or the "windshield tour" (141) of a politician, we are repelled back to the ordinary, to the reality check of the foot soldier's primary experience. And in addition, now literalizing the task that Pyle had reconstructed only imaginatively, Finkel takes us back to the actual home fronts and medical facilities where the wounded warriors of the 2-16 work on their recuperation alongside their families.

In short, for all his story's apparent differences, one of Finkel's primary subjects becomes, once again, the domestic fronts of political obligation. Finkel follows the men home on leave, visits hospitals with Kauzlarich, interviews wives separately and in great detail. In a sequence on the battalion's eighteen-day leaves, we follow one soldier who goes home and impulsively buys a used truck for his son, for \$17,000; another who marries his girlfriend and spends \$5000 on a quickie honeymoon in Las Vegas; another who, after attending the memorial service of a fellow platoon member, blows \$7000 on a shopping spree, getting drunk, and patronizing a stripper bar on his first day home in Ohio. (This is the same soldier whose ultimate re-enlistment, Finkel observes, only reminds us of the arbitrary cash bonuses used to keep an overstretched all-volunteer force afloat [264].) For his own part, Kauzlarich—who has constructed, we are told, his "very own war" of intricate flow charts and strategies (232)—finds he cannot communicate anything about it: not only to Petraeus, but to his own wife, who struggles to remain relentlessly upbeat despite her frustration and loneliness while raising her kids by herself at Fort Riley (217).

These very human, personal trials might seem like universal to the experience of war; in part, they are. But like Pyle before him, Finkel also works to weave such seemingly transhistorical, philosophical matters into a more ordinary portrait of ideological and cultural exchanges specific to his historical moment. Take, for instance, the moment in *The Good Soldiers* when we hear about a football team in Colorado that fastens its attention on one of the injured men from the 2-16. In a gesture of support, the team posts its photograph on the Web, showing its members all yelling “freedom” as their picture is snapped. Finkel writes:

That picture was posted [on the Web], too, and to see it was to think of how the war really had come to stitch the nation together, from coast to coast and border to border there were thirty thousand knots of people screaming “freedom” into a camera because they knew somebody, or knew somebody who knew somebody, who had been injured in Iraq. (237)

Now, it might seem that the Web—as if the 2009 counterpart to Ernie Pyle’s fan mail—contributes to a perceived or virtual community, an imagined national tie with the soldiers in Iraq. And yet, while these citizens are indeed transposing the cause of freedom to an ordinary register, Finkel’s cautionary phrase “to see it was to think” is quite telling here. And that is because the entire thrust of *The Good Soldiers*, of course, has been to show us the reality-gap not only between front and home front, but sometimes between men fighting in the same battalion. What we want to see or think isn’t what we get.

It is important to be clear here. As I’ve said, American military personnel do indeed honor the more formal, transcendent ideological terms of their service commitment; quite often they will speak, for instance, of defending freedom. The point is simply that, because of their additional need to refashion their understanding in more concrete, personal terms, they end up not, in Finkel’s rendering, shepherding “freedom” into Iraq in ways we might traditionally construe the term.⁷ Rather, that cause gets a decidedly post-9/11 remodeling in the ordinary. As Finkel reports the men’s version, interpolated through a moment when Kauzlarich is looking at his own family, “the [ideal] end state in Iraq would be that Iraqi children can go out on a soccer field and play safely. Parents can let their kids go out and play, and they don’t have a concern in the world. Just like us” (15). Freedom thus comes to mean not political liberty, but freedom from fear, the ability to move about and feel secure.

Moreover, the men themselves have not invented this rationale independently; on the contrary, it turns out to have been embedded in the explicit tactical approach behind the surge itself. Specifically, it reflects the importing of the so-called “community policing” anticrime strategy from American streets to counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq (the so-called “COIN” program). In this policing strategy, developed in American cities in the late 1970s and 1980s—and which one can find echoed in the writings of Petraeus, among others—the war in Iraq could not succeed simply by massive shows of force, nor by conceiving of counterinsurgency in narrowly military terms. Instead, under the rubric of nation-building, soldiers were asked to work more like local aldermen or beat cops, building trust from the Iraqis. More specifically, like police officers in the community-oriented approach back home, soldiers were taught to reinforce the existing authority structures in their locale, solicit cooperating citizens to collaborate on practical solutions for everyday order, and use that rebuilt trust to gather more effective intelligence on threats to restoring national sovereignty (Echoing advice given to police patrol operators in the U.S., for example, Petraeus’s doctrine advised “GET OUT AND WALK, MOVE MOUNTED, WORK DISMOUNTED.”) Giving a soccer ball to local boys, mentioned repeatedly in *The Good Soldiers* and photographed in Petraeus’s own writings, became the iconic public image of this Iraq program (Petraeus; K. Williams; Celeski; Long).

This theory also provides a fuller context for the struggle of meaning in Kauzlarich’s mind. Though Kauzlarich arrives in Iraq conceiving his mission in World War II terms, we soon see him going through all the steps that would have been commonplace among police forces in American cities back home (cf. Kelling and Wilson): community meetings with the locals in order to listen to their complaints and to design possible solutions; establishing a local troop presence, much like a precinct station (49), in an Iraqi neighborhood (here the tactic is invoked by the acronym COP), partly to gather intelligence there (32); focusing on the local, social service problems of those neighborhoods, like trash removal or sewers. (And using cash, it should be said, to overcome neighborhood resistance; as Petraeus advised, “money is ammunition” [82]). Early on, Kauzlarich remarks wistfully that “[t]he great leaders of previous wars may not have had to do sewers” (68), but soon is on board with the new mission. And that is because he now sees that the *primary* aim of such efforts, as in domestic policing, is to establish a core of trust in Iraqis’ perceptions of the US military presence. Crucially, the idea is to get Iraqis to recognize his troops’ basic “decency” (50). In other words, the policy is designed to have Iraqis see them as “good” in an ordinary, personal sense: it is

what the transcendent value of democracy comes to mean. And why, in a startling resonance with the ethos created by Ernie Pyle, normalcy becomes—however contradictory this may sound—the goal both complementing and proceeding from the providing of security. It is how the men hope to make the mission theirs: understandable, closer to home.

Of course, putting this putative norm of decency into practice, or extracting it from the demands of military occupation, is another matter altogether. Kansas and Rustimiyah turn out to have little to say to each other, as one community meeting on trash removal shows (97-98). Or take, for instance, Bush's own evocation of an Iraqi mother who wants, ostensibly, the same thing an American one does, "*a chance for that child to grow up in peace and realize dreams . . . to go outside and play and not fear harm*" (220). As humane or incontrovertible as this mission goal may sound—who can protest the playing of soccer, or the freedom to be a child?—the severity of the metaphorical reduction leaves much unanswered. The seemingly universal image actually substitutes a Rockwellian iconography for more difficult policy considerations about who decides how such security might be achieved, or what it has to do with better schools, sovereign economic councils, or local democratic deliberation. (After the U.S. invasion, Iraqi women feared going outside, or attending jobs, but not merely because of random criminal acts. [Cf. Riverbend].) On top of that—leaving aside that it is an American *football* team putting its photo on the Web—there is the matter of sending soccer balls abroad as if the act conveys cross-cultural understanding: our football, your football.

Moreover, beneath its soft-sell (soccer mom) exterior, the vision contains the seeds of an Orwellian reversal: freedom now actually becomes the stepchild of its antithesis, security. This is a contradiction that puts extraordinary strains upon the soldiers tasked to implement the mission. True enough, soldier labor is being rewritten, regenerated, though not as Pyle imagined it: good soldiers are now defined as community builders, and surely their own desire for decency is understandable. But given Kauzlarich's own nostalgia for military meaning, under the new banner of security the desire to be good soldiers might well revert to its more traditional training. That is, in the long run, the providing of security can quickly become its own good, and soldiers could find themselves implicated in a domesticated, yet still military-bound conception of their work. This turnabout is reflected, for example, when one soldier goes home and attends a Kansas State University football game, where an argument breaks out about whether President Bush is a "good" man (212). Reflecting yet another dimension of Finkel's keyword, the soldier flashes back from looking at his own daughters to a day in Iraq, when he

protected a little girl from a man who slapped her for waving at U.S. troops. He had grabbed the man, threatening him with arrest or death if ever did it again. “‘It felt good to say it,’ [the soldier] had said that day . . . ‘It felt good to snatch him off the street in front of people. It felt good to see the fear in his eyes. That felt good’” (212). Actually seeking out fear now becomes its own mission, and feeling good becomes one of its justifications. Decency, unfortunately, at the end of a gun.

As the final turn of the screw, Finkel suggests that home is actually is *not* the place the men ever return to, even on those eighteen-day leaves. It is not only that the mission asks soldiers to implement “safe streets” like the ones at home they can no longer feel part of. Moreover, when they return to the U.S. itself, home is made over into a special place, full of heartfelt performances and reaffirmed ties and, as I’ve said, sometimes immoderate spending; families and soldiers alike try to construct a home that will put them at peace, temporarily. But when the soldiers go back to Iraq, Finkel writes, their actual home returns to being a place of mundane details, loss, getting batteries for the recorded message to be sent out to your husband. Or, it can be something as ordinary as waffles falling out of a box onto the kitchen floor:

Here was home in its truest form, when the soldier who lived there was not on the front porch watching a thunderstorm, or proposing, or passing out on the couch, or buying a truck, but was still in Iraq. It was what home was like not on the eighteen days that Kauzlarich would be there, but on the four hundred days he would not (215).

It is not only, then, that Finkel shows us how versions of the war at the front or at home become “vastly different and largely unshared with each other” (216). He also shows how the men of 2-16, at first empowered but ultimately undermined by their mission of soccer and security, fight for a home whose normalcy, like the success of the surge, has long receded behind them. If home was ever a place of security and freedom to begin with.

(III)

It goes without saying, of course, that my own focus on political obligation neglects other issues—about the depiction of war’s waste and violence and voyeurism, for example—that are equally important to war correspondents, and that Ernie Pyle himself took to his wartime grave.⁸ A different kind of examination might well have emphasized, moreover, the ways in which Pyle or Finkel’s focus on

a normative or mid-American masculinity needlessly subordinates the importance of ethnic or racial or gender diversity in the troops as such or, say, the complicated roles of masculinity and racism at the point of COIN's attack in Iraq. Nor does my account of community policing abroad exhaust the manifold ways in which a neoconservative war abroad drew upon one at home (Wilson 2010: 161-64). And there is always more to think about, in regard to the home front. As I have suggested, for instance, much of Finkel's account certainly bears comparison with the extraordinary outpouring of recent writings, including blogs, which have documented the ongoing trials facing today's military families. What some of this new literature shows us is that repeated and extended call-ups, state laws that discriminate against the transient residencies of spouses, and even the contradictions within military culture itself—which often contorts domesticity into its own kind of “readiness”—means that the home front is not a locus of the normal, but a “new normal” (cf. Causey; Buckholtz, *Standing By*). This new normal is, in many senses, not Kansas anymore.

For these reasons and others, pigeonholing *The Good Soldiers* as simply a debunking of the Pyle paradigm will not do. Indeed, as I have shown, Pyle himself did much more than sentimentally stitch home and front together, or always portray a neatly homogeneous nation. Rather, Pyle's evocation of New Deal iconography, labor-centeredness, and regional difference sometimes conjured up a pluralistic (albeit overwhelmingly white) domestic vision to aid the mission.⁹ Conversely, *The Good Soldiers* suggests that the forging of political obligation is hardly an antique notion: indeed, may even be *more* pressing in modern “police actions” where political and military leaders toil on despite the absence of citizen consent—more pressing, and also more vexed. Covertly and often not so covertly, Finkel's narrative suggests that originally-domestic practices like community policing may not really be up to the task of managing intricate matters of sovereignty and order on foreign soil. And *The Good Soldiers* explores the costs of asking fighting men (and of course women) to serve such missions when they cannot correlate their ordinary understanding of political obligation with their experience at the front—or how they can be asked to defend a “homeland” when home itself is such an elusive quantity.

Even acknowledging this telling critique, however—and certainly because the embedding of war correspondents continues to be debated—we would also do well to consider the legacy of the Pyle paradigm for interpreting the *political* meanings of modern combat. And on this score, a certain double bind seems apparent: while brilliantly deciphering the contradictions of political obligation

and mission objectives, even Finkel's narrative encounters limits imposed by the interpretive perimeter it has assigned itself. For example, Finkel tells us that his soldiers never really know much of anything about the Iraq whose mission it was, ostensibly, to save or make secure. We get a brief crystallization of this argument within the book's sequence about an Iraqi translator who pleads with the troops to get otherwise-off-limits medical assistance from the base hospital for a daughter injured in a car bombing. This request, which soldiers quickly honor, comes very close to being a microcosm of their mission, and Finkel's theme of simple human decency: if not making that child's street safe, the soldiers get a chance to heal her from the effects of its insecurity. Yet their efforts fall short of actually coming to know the realities of the translator's life, which Finkel briefly patches together for his reader (178-84). Despite having that translator and other Iraqis in their midst, such comradeship in arms fails to displace, Finkel observes, the images that dominate the men's perceptions of Iraq: "men with prayer beads and women in black drapes and calves in living rooms and goats on roofs" (174).

And yet, this is where the double bind takes hold. On the one hand, the critique above seems entirely valid, suggesting as it does that "suspicion in 360 degrees" ultimately rebounds back upon the 2-16's own group consciousness. On the other, it is of course to this same perimeter that Finkel has overwhelmingly confined his *own* narrative; his readers never learn very much of what Iraq needs or wants, either, and brief forays into the lives of collaborators is not liable to be enough.¹⁰ Nor does it seem sufficient to suggest that what the troops cannot perceive is their common humanity with Iraqi citizens. While falling back on that commonality is again true as far as it goes, unfortunately it can also end up sounding very much like the mission philosophy Finkel has otherwise so effectively critiqued. Like the mission of exhibiting "decency," that is, this utopian prospect of such unacknowledged kinship sidesteps the difficult questions of power created, for example, by the effects of the invasion, or by the role of regional and ethnic difference in Iraq, or how the those Iraqis being policed would describe the role of national sovereignty in determining their needs in the first place. And thus, whether those needs are actually so recognizable to soldiers, to war correspondents, and thus to stateside readers.

Meanwhile, it turns out even the innovative narrative techniques Finkel brings to bear on the political meanings of his story reflect the limits of this material and narrative perimeter. Because Finkel uses free indirect discourse to fold the 2-16's perspective into his own narrative voice, for example, the men's cultural perceptions and rationalizations sometimes prove indistinguishable from his own. From very

early on in the narrative, we hear repeatedly how the men of the 2-16 use the word “Iraq” as a catch-all lament, and a scapegoat for their own misery and frustrations. And yet, in one of Finkel’s own interpolations, he himself tells us that Iraq leads the world in “broken promises, too, it could seem” (188). Now, on the one hand, if “Iraq” in this moment is troop shorthand for “the mission in Iraq”—well, then perhaps we can unpack the ambiguity about *whose* judgment we’re listening to. Nevertheless, the potential confusion suggests how the narrative voice runs the risk of re-playing the cultural myopia that Finkel otherwise finds so problematic in the 2-16 itself. A similar blurring effect occurs after Kauzlarich visits one of his wounded soldiers in Bethesda before returning to Iraq. Finkel writes the Colonel returns “once again on the front lines of a place where an Iraqi mother wants the same thing for her children that an American mother wants, a chance for that child to grow up in peace and to realize dreams . . .” (241). Of course, we are meant to recall George Bush’s myopic mantra. (A reading reinforced by the fact that the next paragraph tells us of another soldier dead.) But Finkel’s own critique reaches a measurable limit here as well, since the “Iraq” to which Kauzlarich is returning certainly more than its casting in missionspeak. Yet it is almost as if it has been vaporized into Kauzlarich’s own lost cause.

Of course, Finkel’s double bind here is anything but unique among war correspondents. But the inertial pull of the Pyle paradigm can become even more problematic when a correspondent, albeit quite understandably, gravitates towards a political assessment of soldiering that takes on a testimonial aura, an honoring of the “ridiculous” yet compelling “normalcy” of fighters honoring their political obligation whatever its costs to them personally. That predicament arises for Finkel, for example, when the 2-16’s part of the surge begins to fall apart, a turn captured by the final sequences of *The Good Soldiers*. With many of its COIN accomplishments now in tatters, the battalion sets out again on the very same convoys that had been so ill-advised to begin with. (In military terms, we are told the men must now “transition from Counterinsurgency Operations to High Intensity Combat Operations” [276]). When disaster strikes one such convoy, Kauzlarich is forced to perform his duty of debriefing a junior officer who has witnessed the carnage exacted on his comrades and is struggling with his guilt about surviving. Kauzlarich tries to calm the soldier down, mainly by reassuring him that he had performed to all protocols, and that he had earned his trip home to the U.S. And at first, seemingly consistent with its aim of narrating different “realities,” Finkel’s narrative cycles around the battalion, and then pauses to invoke its own titular refrain:

In another part [of the base], a soldier was thinking about whatever a soldier thinks about after seeing a dog licking up a puddle of blood that was Winegar's, or Reiher's, or Hanley's, or Bennett's, or Miller's, and shooting the dog until it was dead.

The good soldiers.
They really were. (292)

Again, in this complex moment, Finkel probably intended to remind us of the multiple, fragmented resonances of his keyword-phrase, and the bizarre acts that can accompany any soldier's desire (however misguided) for decency. Nevertheless, it is here, in the surprisingly un-fragmented return of the word "really," that even this most sophisticated redrafting of the Pyle paradigm seems to run into difficult interpretive territory. It is not, as is so frequently argued, as simple a matter of our need to support the troops whatever we think of the mission, as much as I myself might agree with that point of view. Rather, I think, the difficulty of Finkel's qualification is as follows: if the unifying affirmation of what these soldiers "really were" means to suggest any equivalence between their fulfilling of domestic political obligation and the "real" political meanings of the U.S. presence in Iraq, the contradictions I have enumerated above—about confusing freedom with security, assessing Iraqi needs via policing, transposing middle-American "normalcy" to imagining those needs—might only proliferate. Indeed, those contradictions are what I take *The Good Soldiers* itself to document.

To put this more simply, by ultimately affirming his vexed phrase of the "good soldiers"—a refrain one finds across Ernie Pyle's writings as well—Finkel no doubt meant to signal his final indebtedness as a journalist to the infantrymen he covered. In this way he returns us to Michael Herr's film clip, and the unstated bond that often is forged between the journalist and the soldiers with whom he or she travels. A bond that, paradoxically, often only deepens when the war goes bad. Again, one is tempted to say: fair enough. *The Good Soldiers* ends movingly by showing us a full roster of the 2-16, and then photographs of the battalion members who were killed during the period depicted in Finkel's book. Like many such photo-arrays in our post-9/11 world, the silent gallery reminds us of genuine suffering and sacrifice. And yet, whether a reflection of the bonds that form in the popular arts of everyday newspaper columns, or in the retrospective sophistication of narrative nonfiction,

the scene above may also remind us of some of the risks of intertwining one's portrait of political obligation with the rather different terms of the journalist's own. In the end, it might simply remind us of the many good reasons why war correspondents are so often drawn to affirming the "ordinary," and the "real," in conditions that nearly always stretch the meaning of these words.

Notes

1. Finkel reports (120) that in 2006 that 15 percent of the U.S. Army's recruits were given waivers for past criminal records.
2. See also Nelson. The documentary ethos has been discerned in *Ernie Pyle's Story of G.I. Joe* (1945); see Doherty, and Dudley Nichols.
3. Nichols also offers the intriguing speculation that Pyle's columns often flew under the radar of censors *because* they seemed so benign (*Ernie's War* xiv). Here and in most places throughout, I will use masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to soldiers, because Pyle and Finkel focus exclusively on men. In Pyle's case, I will focus on his European-theatre columns, where he forged his style.
4. For efficiency's sake, I will cite page numbers from the most complete collection of Pyle's writings, *Ernie's War*. Readers should note, however, the editing choices discussed by Nichols in his introduction (xvi), which included leaving out home addresses.
5. Polls tended to suggest antiwar sentiment peaked right during Finkel's tour with the 2-16; see Kapur.
6. See Finkel's account of Kauzlarich's actual sermonizing, 85. On the jeremiad's generational emphasis, see Bercovitch.
7. Here I am indebted to the superb personal account provided by Buckholtz's *Standing By*. See esp. 64 ff. on explaining "fighting for freedom" to her children.
8. See, for instance, *Ernie's War* 280-81, 283. I also refer to the unpublished column draft found on Pyle's body, that addressed the "mass production of death" on the battlefield; see Tobin 3-4.
9. Though Pyle had little of substance to say about cultural or ethnic difference in his war theatres--just substitute Mexicans for Arabs, he told his audience in one dispatch, and you will understand the Tunisian campaign (63)--Pyle might in fact have served as a bridge figure between Mid-American "normalcy" and a more pluralistic or urban cultural outlook. Certain scenes in *The Story of G.I. Joe*, for instance, suggest that liberating Italy was tantamount to rescuing its traditional ethnic practices.
10. Finkel's focus on a putatively typical U.S. infantryman in Iraq, likewise, might make us forget that this particular war featured an enormous number of private security contractors, forces that contributed to Iraqi distrust and to chaos on the ground (Fainaru; Tavernise; Glanz and Lehren).

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