

COMMENTARY BY CALEB S. CAGE

On Chickenshit

However much society, culture, and warfare change, there seems to be one constant for a military in combat: chickenshit, and soldiers of every generation can give you examples of it even if they have never heard the word. It is the superfluous tasks that senior officers require of their underlings during wartime boredom, the trivialities of rank structures foisted on them in the name of military discipline, the infuriating injustices that seem to occur so easily when the two are matched with personal insecurities.

Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War, a book by Paul Fussell, offers the most thorough study of it in a chapter called “Chickenshit: An Anatomy.” Fussell describes chickenshit as a term that does not merely “imply complaint about the inevitable inconveniences of military life: overcrowding and lack of privacy, tedious institutional cookery, deprivation of personality, general boredom.” Rather, chickenshit describes the behaviors that make “military life worse than it need be.” It is:

petty harassment of the weak by the strong; open scrimmage for power and authority and prestige; sadism thinly disguised as necessary discipline; a constant “paying off of old scores”; and insistence on the letter rather than the spirit of ordinances. Chickenshit is so called—instead of horse- or bull- or elephant shit—because it is small-minded and ignoble and takes the trivial seriously.

It is easily recognized, Fussell writes, “because it never has anything to do with winning the war.”

Fussell’s broad definition would ring true for any generation. It is just the way of the military, something specific about a system that is predicated on rank and power. Each generation, however, would likely describe the specific instances of chickenshit experienced during wartime in very different terms. Soldiers who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan have a remarkably different worldview than those described in Fussell’s book. The type of warfare, the broader American culture, the media, and the political climate have all changed between the last truly modern war and the first truly postmodern war. Accordingly, Fussell’s depiction of chickenshit in World War II requires an update, one that shows how the all-volunteer force, the rise of social media, the growing divide between civilian and military cultures, and the professionalization of the military have greatly changed the experience of the soldier on the battlefield. Again, chickenshit is a military constant, but the perceptions and responses to it change from generation to generation.

Fussell’s most interesting examples of chickenshit come from fiction authors that had written about their war. These authors were “precisely the types that are chickenshit’s eternal targets, bright Jewish boys like Norman Mailer and Joseph Heller, or intelligent sarcastic kids from good colleges, like Kingsley Amis.” These were the spokespeople of a disgruntled group of conscripts who were unwilling or unable to register their complaints for themselves. Their fictive accounts were more powerful than the memoirs produced during their generation, and spoke more precisely, and with brilliant cynicism, to the issues of their day. Timothy Corsallis’s poem, “What I Never Saw,” for instance, is a brief description of the lack of high purpose he expected to encounter. Amis catalogs the chickenshit of Major Raleigh in *My Enemy’s Enemy* so tirelessly that it would be funny if the stories of bureaucracy and retribution were not so obviously derived from truth. And, of course, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* is a case study in chickenshit.

To examine such novels for today’s wars, though, proves to be difficult. Former Army officer and writer Matt Gallagher wrote in a piece for the *Atlantic* that while literary markets are saturated with war memoirs and other nonfiction about war, “even the most avid bookworm would be hard-pressed to identify a war novel that could be considered definitive of the new generation’s battles.” Perhaps a war has to be over before it can be examined, he surmises. Perhaps there just is no fiction market at all anymore. Unconvinced, Gallagher settles on what seems to be the beginning of an explanation with a terse comment from a colleague on Twitter:

“Our wars lack collective national will, [there’s] confusion over purpose, and are protracted.”

The lack of literary fiction associated with contemporary wars is not a new complaint. Tom Wolfe wrote of similar concerns in his classic *Harper’s* essay, “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast,” which was mainly dedicated to chastising the writing establishment for getting away from realism in fiction. He writes that publishers:

had their noses pressed against their thermopane glass walls scanning the billion-footed city for the approach of the young novelists who, surely, would bring them the big novels of the racial clashes, the hippie movement, the New Left, the Wall Street boom, the sexual revolution, the war in Vietnam. But such creatures, it seemed, no longer existed.

Wolfe famously proposed a New Journalism, an approach to nonfiction that was bolstered by the principles of novel writing in the same way that fiction authors should have benefited from journalistic approaches.

A similar mingling of genres has occurred since Wolfe wrote that, and it could be argued that his approach has much to do with what is happening today.

Today’s wars have been during the information age, with constant updates fed to a hungry global public through embedded reporters, with soldiers filling the remaining void with blogs, pictures, and videos. Wolfe’s New Journalism encouraged more access to the authors’ opinions, their senses, and even approves of a novelistic approach to nonfiction. The new media of today’s wartime bloggers, the logical extension of Wolfe’s approach, performs many of the functions that fictionalized accounts served during previous wars.

The most famous of these blogs have become books, allowing them to exemplify changes in media, as well as in the wartime memoir. In the best examples, they are a coherent volume based on the blog posts. At their worst, they are merely edited and bound printouts of the blog posts with no real context or depth. Although there are numerous of these books, Jason Christopher Hartley’s *Just Another Soldier: A Year on the Ground in Iraq* and Colby Buzzell’s *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* represent early examples of the blog-to-book format from 2006, while Benjamin Tupper’s *Greetings From Afghanistan, Send More Ammo: Dispatches from Taliban Country* and Matt Gallagher’s *Kaboom: Embracing the Suck in a Savage Little War* effectively update the genre for 2010.

The first of these books were raw, intense accounts that have achieved critical acclaim. It is Hartley's strength as a writer that sets him apart from his peers. His irreverence is thoughtful, and more important, thought through. He sees a bigger picture, rebels against it as much as possible, and weaves in his own personal story explaining his contrary nature while he is at it. Of course, his being contrary is ironic: he is, after all, a voluntary infantry soldier deployed with his unit to Iraq. Hartley, it seems, thrives on such conflicts. The only time that he does not seem to be involved in conflict within himself, within the chafing reality of military rank structures, is when he is focused on an external conflict, that of life and death. Colby Buzzell's book, perhaps the most famous in the subgenre, is at times funny, irreverent, cynical, and deeply representative of his peers on the battlefield. However, if the title of his work, *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, also indicates some internal struggle while in training or deployed, his book is almost profoundly devoid of such examinations. If Hartley's book is about defining conflicts, developing them, and eventually mastering them, then Buzzell's book merely describes the conflicts he sees, not seeking to understand them, or even recognizing the conflicts he creates in telling his own story.

Benjamin Tupper's *Greetings* is a very straightforward representation of the genre. His experiences as an Embedded Training Team leader are an interesting perspective for future generations. But as one reviewer put it, no matter what the title might suggest, the book "offers a scattershot view of the minutia of being deployed in Afghanistan rather than the munitions." Conversely, Gallagher's *Kaboom*, simply stated, will likely be remembered as the quintessential memoir of his generation's combat experiences. Not only does it successfully combine the finest innovations of blogging with the finest aspects of traditional memoir writing, but it easily and slyly avoids the traps of each as well. His work is authentic, fully and successfully updating for his generation what Amis and others did for theirs.

Collectively, these books show that chickenshit is still a soldier's burden. These books are even peppered with similar barnyard language. They sometimes even use the word *chickenshit*, though not in the way that Fussell did. About his unwillingness to deal with an alligator, Buzzell writes that his fellow soldiers told him to "stop acting like a chickenshit." And later, he writes that attacks on his platoon had mostly been "chickenshit hit and run bullshit.... Every time we'd get hit, they'd be nowhere in sight." Hartley writes, "before you start thinking I'm a whiner, I should mention something very important: bitching is the only truly inalienable right of the soldier." Continuing, he writes, "I love the Army and I love my country. But that doesn't mean I have to enjoy the taste of horseshit." Later,

he channels Fussell again while he describes being busted for a curfew violation during training. “I’m a thirty-year-old infantryman who will soon be given the ultimate authority of killing anyone I adjudicate to be a threat,” he writes, “but until then I have the same curfew that I did when I was in junior high.” And his punishment causes him to use a common variation: “plane tickets and hotel rooms have already been paid for by my father and sister so they can come up for the shitbird deployment ceremony.” But beyond these basic examples, today’s soldiers do not dwell as long or as often on the unbearable chickenshit as their predecessors did in fiction.

In order to understand this change, how chickenshit has been updated, one must first examine the term through a much broader lens. A crucial text for doing so is Harry Frankfurt’s essay entitled *On Bullshit*. Frankfurt, a moral philosopher, uses the tools of linguistic analysis to plumb the depths and find the true essence of his subject, deeper even than Fussell delves regarding chickenshit. In his work, Frankfurt offers a definition that is strikingly similar to Fussell’s, referring to the British military usage of “bull.” He writes:

according to the [*Oxford English Dictionary*] ... refers to ‘unnecessary routine tasks or ceremonial; excessive discipline or ‘spit-and-polish’; = red-tape.... Here the term *bull* evidently pertains to tasks that are pointless in that they have nothing much to do with the primary intent of justifying purpose of the enterprise which requires them. Spit and polish and red tape do not genuinely contribute, it is presumed, to the ‘real’ purpose of military personnel.

Frankfurt has a linguistic advantage over Fussell, though, in that *bullshit* can also be used as a verb. Frankfurt is able to study bullshit from a prescriptive level, while Fussell’s discussion is mostly descriptive. In Frankfurt’s essay, he asserts that the act of bullshitting someone has some of the characteristics of lying to them, but is at the same time somewhere “short of lying.” That is, the person’s sincerity and motive matters as well. He asks the reader to imagine that a person tells them a lie about how much money they have. In doing so, they are lying about the amount, and they are also lying by indicating that they believe what they are telling you is true, leaving the victim “twice deceived.” A bullshitter, he argues, is guilty only of the second deception. Frankfurt later gets to the heart of his definition: it is the

“lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit.”

In what is probably the most brilliant summation of Frankfurt’s theoretical approach to the meaning of bullshit, he turns toward cultural application. “The realms of advertising and of public relations, and the nowadays closely related realms of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept,” he explains. By virtue of being a bullshitter and not a liar, it is still true that the messenger aims to “get away with something.” It is also possibly true that “although it is produced without concern for the truth, it need not be false.” In many ways, this description fits the way war was sold, especially when one considers this line from Frankfurt: “[the bullshitter] does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.”

The debate over the selling of the war, who bought it, and how it was paid for has since become an enormous part of America’s current political landscape, but it also reveals another element required for updating chickenshit. An exchange that took place only a few years after the onset of the wars in 2001 and 2003, respectively, reconnects Frankfurt’s usage of bullshit with Fussell’s usage of chickenshit. In 2004, a University of Georgia sophomore Bradley Alexander took to the pages of conservative activist David Horowitz’s “Front Page Magazine” to excoriate Professor John Morrow for his introductory history lecture. Alexander was uncomfortable with Morrow’s views on the current military conflicts, how they applied to the greater topic of the nation’s history, and particularly Morrow’s use of foul language, like the word *chickenshit*. In response, Morrow stood by his critique, including his usage of chickenshit:

for students of military history, it is one of the milder epithets, and if they are going to take a course on war, they are going to encounter a good deal of profanity. Veteran Paul Fussell’s excellent work *Wartime* defines “chicken shit” in reference to the bureaucratic garbage that soldiers of World War II encountered.

But Morrow expands the definition by stating that the term “also refers to people who do not have the courage of their convictions,” and that he “applied the term specifically to President Bush and Vice President Cheney, who avoided service in Vietnam.” He found it ironic that Bush avoided service by joining the National

Guard, but “now had no difficulty sending the Guard to extended duty in Iraq.” Continuing, he writes, “I further condemned this administration for ignoring and even dismissing its best military brains, who informed Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Bush that we needed ‘more boots on the ground’ in Iraq, a clear set of goals, and an ‘exit strategy’ before we entered the war.”

In defending his usage of chickenshit, Morrow invoked the related word *chicken-hawk*. Fairly or unfairly, the term has been effectively leveled against Bush and Cheney because of Bush’s likely use of family connections and Cheney’s reliance on student deferments. It is a politically charged word, often allowing one side to charge their opponents with cowardice when they too are guilty. But even if the president and his lieutenant had served in wartime, the chicken-hawk critique would still hold, if more broadly. The administration had the support of nearly every major political leader in congress, and from both sides of the aisle. Lawmakers on both sides seemed determined to prosecute the war, to make it as painless as they possibly could, and to spare no expense in doing so. Of course, there proved to be no mission, no tangible goals, no timetables, and no exit strategy, all as Morrow points out. These problems came from the top, from lawmakers on both sides choosing the chickenshit route of voting for a war without declaring war, and sending soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines into combat without an idea of what victory would look like or what it would cost, and failing to mobilize the American people behind them.

This chickenshit of a chicken-hawk, much like the chickenshit Colby Buzzell described earlier, references fear. But in this case, the fear was not that of soldiers on the front lines, those who could be excused for being a little afraid, but those who were afraid of political minefields, of presenting a timeline, goals, and an exit strategy, of being painted as being “against the troops,” afraid of entering a nuanced position on the war, for or against, and afraid of pushing the debate toward a declaration of war. The left claims that President Bush lied to send a nation to war. The right claims that liberals don’t support the troops. What is more likely is that both sides bought the bullshit, and then took the chickenshit way out of a very difficult problem facing the nation. Unfortunately, the chickenshit didn’t stop at the top levels. Rather, it descended from each level of the chain of command to those on the battlefield, as these contemporary memoirs point out, even though they are more likely to refer to chickenshit as “bullshit.”

Chickenshit, or bullshit, as depicted in these books comes in at least two different categories. Often, in the military, bullshit is conducted or enforced not because of unit discipline, but because of the intent of putting forth a desired

image. These are the things that Frankfurt describes as “unnecessary routine tasks or ceremonial ... or ‘spit-and-polish.’” But they fit the rest of his definition as well, in that they are presenting themselves in one way—fit, clean, polished, and even refined—even when the reality is likely the opposite. This sort of deception is an age-old military custom, one that is no less defined by Fussell’s chickenshit as it is defined by the “short of lying” in Frankfurt’s bullshit. The second most common form of chickenshit listed in these books is far more related to that described by Morrow, and it comes in terms of risk aversion. Since America and its policymakers are disconnected from these wars abroad, there is an unprecedented amount of fear associated with the hardship of combat for those that they send. It starts at the highest levels, with contractors taking the role of soldiers on the battlefield, and goes all the way down to the lowest ranks, with officers and noncommissioned officers at the tactical level making decisions that amount to little more than infantilizing those soldiers who are on the front lines and accepting the most risk.

Regarding the spit-and-polish pretensions described interchangeably as “bullshit” or “chickenshit” by Frankfurt and Fussell, the examples in these books are legion. According to Buzzell, “even though we’re deployed in a ‘combat zone’ we still do a lot of the same bullshit that we do in the rear,” referring to the sorts of things they might do at their home station. “Like we even do [Physical Training] tests out here.” Matt Gallagher quotes one of his soldiers complaining about being back on their Forward Operating Base (FOB) around all of the brass. “I hate it here, sir,” his soldier says to him. “We always get bitched at for garrison bullshit here,” he echoes. Hartley gives a poignant example that would be believable only to people who have been in the military. Before a memorial ceremony for a fallen soldier named Akintade, Hartley describes a scene as if it were straight out of *Catch-22*. Akintade’s gear sits on display in front of the unit while the Sergeant Major, inspecting it, finds an issue. “Everyone in the formation had the black plate for their night-vision goggles on their helmets, but the helmet on display to represent Akintade didn’t.” This omission could easily be explained—that black plate is a part of a sensitive item that must be accounted for even after a soldier has been killed—but purveyors of chickenshit are seldom logical. Perhaps chief among these complaints, though, were descriptions of inequity with respect to the military awards process. Summing it up perfectly, Buzzell writes, “at award formations every now and then when somebody gets pinned a medal, you’ll hear somebody in the formation cough the word, ‘bullshit’ under their breath....”

Other examples of chickenshit described in these books fall squarely under the banner of the type of risk aversion that infantilizes a combat force. Tupper writes,

“absent any real threat, the powers that be at Bagram have dug up some B-list threats, and have established some ridiculous safety policies with the intent to keep us all on our toes.” He lists the enforced use of safety, reflective belts, and three mile-per-hour speed limits on post. In describing a scene where he was encouraged to line his truck with sandbags to defend against a mine attack, which amounts to questionable physics at best, Hartley invokes the barnyard term: “All of the guys in my truck agreed that we would forgo the sandbags-on-the-floor bullshit and just live dangerously....” And capturing the idea of chickenshit as risk aversion perfectly, Gallagher cites an inscription on the wall of a portable toilet: “Wash your hands before returning to war! Thanks. — Command Sergeant Major.” The country is at war, these troops are on the front line, and as these writers point out, risk aversion has become the watchword from the highest level of policymakers all the way down to the front line enforcers.

Chickenshit as it is described by these authors is really at its worst when it is a combination of the image-driven bullshit described by Frankfurt, and the chickenshit of risk aversion. Benjamin Tupper writes a particularly poignant piece on the passing of an admired noncommissioned officer, Sergeant First Class Deghand, who was killed during their deployment. On the surface, Deghand had been moved due to interpersonal squabbles, but Tupper describes the move as being based on the fact that he was a “straight shooter [who] didn’t put up with [higher’s] bullshit.” One can never know if Tupper’s description is true, but the settling of old scores by the powerful is exactly the kind of thing Fussell would describe as chickenshit. Gallagher’s best examples of the combination of the two types of chickenshit are ascribed to his view of a major generational gap between the Cold Warriors in charge and the counterinsurgency fighters on the ground. In a telling moment, one of Gallagher’s senior sergeants helps his young lieutenant understand direction from higher: “I’ve been in the army for ten years,” the sergeant says. “I can smell bullshit a mile away.” Those who are visiting this chickenshit on the lower ranks are field grade officers, some of whom were great and excellent at their jobs, but then there were the others who seemed “intent on riding the bureaucratic beast in all its protectionist glory.” These were the ones who were “in too-clean uniforms, criticized trivial things, like soldiers not shaving enough or not wearing a full uniform while they walked to the shower, and then drove back to the [base] in time for dinner.”

With this changed capacity of soldiers to write about their experiences immediately comes an obvious new set of tensions within the military command structure, opening a new possibility for chickenshit that could happen only to this

generation of soldier. Combat units traditionally focus on discipline. And whether it is through extinguishing criticism of the chain of command or through control of information through operations security measures, both fly in the face of the new liberty provided by the Internet, blogs, and other media. The development of this tension between the good of the collective and the rights of the individual provides for the most fascinating aspects of chickenshit, updated.

Tupper addresses the subject only at the end of his book, suggesting that some were uncomfortable with his writing, but no one tried to stop him. Gallagher's story, however, provides a poignant example. Although he had long observed the military's published policy on blogging mandating that the soldier's commander clear any posts for publication, he simply could not bring himself to care anymore after his battalion commander directly threatened his career because he had decided to leave the military after his commitment. In what he describes as a mixture of rage and exhaustion, Gallagher posted a jawdropping blog post questioning his command's competence, their ability to reason, and their concern for things that matter. Accordingly, his commander promised him that he would receive "the next bullshit tasking" that came down, removing him as platoon leader. Gallagher described this as "professional bullying." Fussell would describe it as chickenshit.

For Hartley, the consequences for getting caught blogging could hardly have been worse. Although he chafed under the authority granted his leaders, he genuinely loved and appreciated the military and intended to be a good soldier. After getting in trouble for breaking curfew before the deployment, Hartley makes the mature decision of discontinuing his public blog, if only to keep it alive by setting it to private. Almost a year after he had stopped blogging publicly, and closer to the end of an impressive tenure in Iraq, Hartley drunkenly decided to take his blog live again, complete with all the entries that he had not published to date, and then almost immediately going on leave from Iraq. In the end, he was shuffled through a disciplinary process full of the worst kinds of chickenshit, which he describes in wonderful detail.

Buzzell's story of tension with his command exhibited in *My War* shines a less sympathetic light on the author. As he describes it, he was given a great deal of leeway with respect to his writing. His commander was even a fan Buzzell's prose, inviting him to his office to discuss the glories of Hunter S. Thompson with him and complimenting his writing. Even Buzzell writes that his commander was right, and agrees to scrub information that the enemy might find useful. Astonishingly, a few weeks later Buzzell is called into his Sergeant Major's office and is given a similar speech. The Army was not interested in infringing upon his freedom of

speech, he was told, but they were trying to enforce operational security. Because Buzzell's blog was starting to get more international attention, he was informed that he would no longer be allowed to go on missions off the operating base. The punishment seems draconian and was eventually reversed after media pressure, only to be replaced by an approval process by his chain of command for each of his future entries. It was hardly as harsh as the retribution delivered in the cases of Gallagher's and Hartley's blogs, but Buzzell still bristled too much under the restrictions and decided to discontinue his blog. While on leave from Iraq, he reached out to Jello Biafra, a famous punk musician who was famously against the war in Iraq, and asked him to write a message to post on his blog. He had not cleared it with his command, but it would not have passed muster anyway. In a way that perhaps only Joseph Heller could fully appreciate, the soldier who was treated fairest by his commanders visited chickenshit upon them in return.

However things worked out for them personally and professionally after their blogs were discovered, the chickenshit that these authors describe is tempered with something else that would be terribly uncommon in the fiction from World War II. During previous wars, the nation had instituted a draft, meaning that a much, much larger percentage of the national population had "skin in the game," as the saying goes. These books also include many statements regarding that civilian-military divide. Gallagher writes that "in a volunteer military, we fought for the nation, not with it." Or when he copies a comment from a portable bathroom wall: "America isn't at war. Soldiers are at war. America is at the mall." He attributes this, somewhat correctly, to the national leadership at the time: "I slept through 9/11.... Nine days later, I yawned along with most of my peers as the president asked for our continued participation and confidence in the American economy. He wanted us to keep shopping." But even as they complain, they wear it as a badge of honor as well. Hartley points out that in a volunteer force, some of the best stories are those that could be described as chickenshit: "when soldiers tell stories, the ones they are most proud of are those that involve things sucking." Even the subtitle of Matt Gallagher's memoir, *Embracing the Suck in a Savage Little War*, gets to that point. Perhaps the best explanation of this comes from Hartley when he writes, "being a soldier is to live in a world of shit. You're constantly surrounded by assholes; you have to endure an unending amount of bullshit from you leadership, military regulations and paperwork, and stupid training missions...."

Hartley's description, which he describes as the Tao of Soldiering, is the epitome of chickenshit for today's soldiers. It is the same old nonsense that has been endured for generations. It is different for those serving in places like Iraq and Afghanistan

because the culture has changed, because the ways they communicate and express themselves have changed, and because risk aversion has permeated policy from the highest levels down. Perhaps the biggest difference of all, though, is how this generation responds to it. To them it is just as onerous and infuriating as it has been for every other generation, but because they are a generation of volunteers, it cannot be what defines their service.

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