

B E N F O U N T A I N

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## Soldiers on the Fault Line: War, Rhetoric, and Reality

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**T**he reason I'm here is because I wrote a novel called *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* that was published last year. It's a war novel, and specifically, it's about our wars of the past twelve years in Iraq and Afghanistan, but I suppose it's kind of a strange war novel in that it takes place entirely at a Dallas Cowboys football game on Thanksgiving Day, at the old Texas Stadium, where the Cowboys used to play before Jerry Jones moved them down the road to his new stadium.

Some of you have been forced to read *Billy Lynn* for class, and for that I apologize, but for those of you who haven't, just to give you a rough idea, it's about football, cheerleaders, sex, death, war, capitalism, the transmigration of souls, brothers and sisters, parents and children, the movie industry, Destiny's Child, and the general insanity of American life in the early years of the 21st century. The impulse for this book started building in me around 2003, 2004, when I began to realize that I didn't understand my country—this place where I was born and grew up and had spent my whole life, I didn't have a clue as to why it was the way it was. Mainly this sense coalesced around the war in Iraq. By 2004, it was apparent that we'd begun

this war under false pretenses, on the basis of Weapons of Mass Destruction that didn't exist, and that the best intelligence had shown all along didn't exist. We invaded a country about which we knew virtually nothing, with no coherent plan for occupation, or for implementing our stated goal of establishing democracy, or for our eventual withdrawal.

By the time I'm talking about, 2004, dozens and sometimes scores of American soldiers were losing their lives every month, fighting this war. The best evidence indicated that upwards of 100,000 Iraqi civilians had been killed in the course of the invasion and subsequent insurgency. Our country was running up a mind-boggling debt that's going to be with us for generations. We were also in the midst of producing a cohort of some 40,000 wounded veterans, whose injuries, both physical and psychological, will continue to have consequences for themselves, their families, and our society long after Saddam Hussein is just a blip on our national memory. By any objective measure, the war in Iraq was a disaster, and even worse, a disaster we'd brought on ourselves, yet it continued to be sold to the American people as a just and virtuous and necessary war, a war we could win, that in fact we were winning even as the insurgency grew stronger and more aggressive.

How could a ridiculously low-tech arsenal of suicide vests, car bombs, and IEDs defeat the most powerful military on earth?

This was our government's position, and we accepted it. We swallowed it hook, line, and sinker, and the proof was George W. Bush's re-election as president—some would say his first actual election—in November of 2004.

Cadets, we've seen this movie before, and not that long ago. That was the movie known as Vietnam, and it's recent enough history that its lessons should have been fresh in our minds. Not just the disaster of the war itself, but all of the rhetoric and dissembling that went into justifying the decision to go to war, and then the nearly decades-long parade of whitewashed assessments as to the progress we were making, the victory that would soon be ours.

Vietnam; then Afghanistan and Iraq; and now, perhaps, Syria?

This would be a good time to remember the words of the late I.F. Stone, one of the finest investigative journalists in America during the middle years of the 20th century: "All governments lie, and nothing they say should be believed."

There's no question that al Qaeda was and continues to be a sworn blood-enemy of the United States. It attacked us by land in 1993, with its first bombing of the World Trade Center. It attacked by land again in 1998, with the bombings of our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. It attacked us by sea in 2000, with the bombing of the U.S.S. *Cole* in Yemen. And then, of course, by air in the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Land, sea, and air. I hope even the most confirmed pacifist would recognize the need to respond with decisive force to this kind of sustained attack. But our entirely sane instinct for self-preservation was transformed by our government into something quite different and strange. To put it bluntly—because of 9-11, we invaded Iraq, a country that had nothing to do with 9-11, and whose regime in fact was a bitter enemy of al Qaeda.

Why? How did this happen? How did we let it happen, and why did we endorse the war by re-electing the President in 2004? Are we stupid? As Norman Mailer once said, “Stupidity is the American disease,” but I would argue it’s not that simple. This country has done far too many fine and brilliant things to ascribe the disaster of Iraq to plain stupidity. I would approach it from a different direction and argue that our culture is stupid, and while that doesn’t necessarily make us stupid in the literal sense, it does make us numb. By “culture” I’m talking about the 24-7 force-feed of movies, music, television, Internet, youtubes, youporns, cell phones, iPods, iPads, sports of all kinds at all hours, right-wing news, left-wing news, celebrity news, texts, tweets, emails, and all the rest of it, and that’s even before we get into the numbing effects of the huge array of pharmaceuticals available to us, legal or otherwise.

Cadets, I think this avalanche of electronica, entertainment, and media needs a name, so let me suggest that we call it the Fantasy Industrial Complex.

When you boil it down, it’s pretty clear that the Fantasy Industrial Complex is mostly someone trying to sell us something—a product, a political agenda, a lifestyle, an alleged means to a more beautiful version of ourselves. Or what may be even worse, it’s selling us, our vital statistics in terms of purchasing power and preference, so that we can be targeted by marketers with ever more finely calibrated accuracy. Thanks to the Fantasy Industrial Complex, I think there’s a strong argument to be made that we often don’t know what’s real anymore. To a significant extent, our lives take place in the realm of fantasy, triviality, and materialism, and our senses and mental capacity become numbed as a result.

Well, what’s wrong with being numb; with being comfortably numb, as the song says. What’s wrong with being the functional equivalent of fat and happy, of cruising along in the prolonged adolescence that seems to be the ideal human condition as rendered by the Fantasy Industry? Nothing, maybe, until reality comes along and slaps us in the face: the death of someone close to us, say, or serious illness, or extreme emotional suffering—trouble in our marriage, trouble with children, failed relationships, failure or frustration in our work, or a collective trauma such as we experienced on 9-11, 2001. In other words, the hard stuff of life as it’s actually

lived. It's not a question of if we're going to get hit with a crisis, but when, and the question then is whether we have the emotional and intellectual tools for dealing with it capably enough that we have a chance of coming through more or less intact.

We've all heard the saying, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." In my opinion, that has to be one of the most inane statements ever made about human experience. It's possible for people to be shattered beyond repair, and countries, too. We survive, but we're broken. We limp along in a reduced state. It happens all the time.

9-11 was a crisis of the first order, both individually and collectively. It inflicted on us a harsh and complex reality, harsh enough that for a brief a window of time America was shocked out of its numbness. There were the beginnings of a serious discussion about our history, our role in the world, and who we are as a country. What kind of country we want to be. All this by way of trying to comprehend the violence that was brought down on us in the attacks of 9-11.

Was it something in us?

Was it something in them?

And by the way, who were they, the "them" that attacked us? Every American with a pulse knew about Osama bin Laden, but what about the rest of them, the thousands of young men and presumably women who swore jihad against the United States?

A few days after 9-11, I saw an SUV near my home in Dallas with the words "Nuke Them All" soaped in huge letters along the side windows. I think we can all understand and sympathize with that kind of raw outrage, but the "them" in that equation, that's the hard part. Determining exactly who they are and what they want, what motivates them. "Know your enemy" Sun Tzu says over and over in *The Art of War*. "If ignorant both of your enemy and yourself, you are certain to be in peril."

I think Susan Sontag made a lot of sense when she counseled in the week after 9-11 that "a few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand how we got to this point." For starters, we could have looked into the recent history of the Middle East for some answers, and for clues as to a viable way of going forward. I'm not talking about assigning blame, or embarking on an agenda of running down the United States of America. Rather, I'm talking about trying to determine the facts of the situation—what happened, and who acted, and why. Not the fantasy version, the numbed-out and dumbed-down version, but the true version, or as close to the truth as clear thinking and seeing can get us.

You, cadets, don't have the luxury of living out the perpetual adolescence of the numb and the dumb. At a relatively young age, much younger than most of your fellow Americans, you've made the most profound kind of commitment. It's most definitely not a game, the work you're about. It's about as far from "virtual" as one could imagine, and it runs you up against the most basic existential questions we human beings face.

As a practical matter, being numb and dumb simply isn't an option for soldiers in combat, not if they plan on surviving. I would venture that any numbed-out soldier operating in a combat zone isn't long for this world.

The reality of the military has to be about as far from the world of the Fantasy Industrial Complex as we can get, so it's surely one of the great paradoxes of our time that the Fantasy Industry has so thoroughly co-opted the military for its own purposes. We saw the process beginning in the days immediately following 9-11. As huge and awful as the attacks of 9-11 were, the Fantasy Industrial Complex showed itself to be bigger, stronger, more enduring. The difficult and complicated reality behind those attacks was quickly reduced to a simple-minded, easily digestible narrative of us versus them, good versus evil, Christians versus infidels.

One clue to the unsettling complexity of the real situation might have been found in the nationalities of the hijackers, the mysterious "them" that I was talking about a few moments ago. Fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were from our staunch ally Saudi Arabia. One of the leaders of the hijackers, Mohammed Atta, was from that other staunch American ally, Egypt. Not a single hijacker was Iraqi or Afghan. Not a single hijacker came from what would soon become known as the infamous "Axis of Evil." A few determined pulls on those loose threads might have gone a long way toward unraveling the fantasy narrative, but rather than engaging in a clear-eyed study of the situation, we got instead the vast machine of the Fantasy Industrial Complex, whose full might was brought to bear in promoting this dangerously simplified narrative known as the War on Terror.

Our government embarked on a concerted advertising campaign to build support for war, and specifically, for an invasion of Iraq. It's an old story now. For those who care to read the history, the components of that relentless ad campaign are right out there to see: the fear-mongering in the form of WMDs; the grand neoconservative project of implanting democracy in the Middle East, and remaking the entire region in our own image; and the goal of restoring American prestige by replacing images of the burning Twin Towers with those of American forces triumphing over Arab enemies. The campaign was persuasive enough that Congress and public opinion quickly fell into line. We invaded Iraq in March of 2003, and by May 1st

we were presented with the mother of all commercials, President Bush in a flight suit on the deck of the U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln*, telling us against the backdrop of the “Mission Accomplished” banner that major combat operations in Iraq had come to a successful conclusion.

At this point, I think it’s worth examining an interview with the man who conceived and stage-managed President Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” moment on the *Abraham Lincoln*. That man was none other than Karl Rove, otherwise known as “Bush’s Brain,” who sat down for an interview with the journalist Ron Suskind that was subsequently published in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* in October, 2004. Rove explained in remarkably frank terms the Administration’s approach to power: Those in the, quote, “reality-based community [journalists, historians, old-fashioned policy wonks] . . . believe that solutions emerge from [the] judicious study of discernible reality . . . But that’s not the way the world really works anymore. [The United States is] an empire now, and when we act we create our own reality.”

In Rove’s view, it doesn’t matter what the reality of a situation is when you can remake it at will. “The judicious study of discernible reality”—in other words, the past five hundred years of Renaissance empiricism and Enlightenment principles—go straight out the window, because we’re an empire now, and the world is whatever we want it to be.

But as we’ve seen, reality, discernible or not, is stronger than any of us. As the reality of Iraq showed itself to be less than malleable to the Rovian concept of power and empire, we saw the Fantasy Industrial Complex go into overdrive. Some of the pronouncements and slogans that resulted were famous for a while, platitudes and political swagger such as “Freedom is on the march,” “Bring it on,” and “We’re kicking ass.” Words that had nothing to do with reality, words whose purpose was to distort, to sell an agenda, to numb the audience—or to put it another way, the language of advertising.

The American soldier was one of the most effective props in the Fantasy Industry’s marketing arsenal. Support the Troops became the phrase we heard constantly, and not just the government, but the entire private-sector Fantasy Industry got in on it. War, and specifically, Supporting the Troops, became a great branding device. We saw it in the entertainment industry, in professional sports, and in business generally. If you wanted to generate positive associations for your product, you made it clear how much you supported the troops.

The sum effect of all this was to take us farther and farther from the reality of the war. We were allowed and even encouraged to dwell in the fantasy version of war,

the infantile version. No photos of coffins at Dover Air Force Base. No torture, but rather, “an alternative set of procedures.” Abu Ghraib, that was the work of “a few bad apples.” Dead Iraqi civilians, the very people we were supposed to be liberating, were “collateral damage.” The insurgents were a ragtag bunch of “dead-enders,” and month after month we were assured that the insurgency was “on its last legs.”

The ceaseless refrain of “Support the Troops” made it all so much easier to accept, as if to analyze the reasons and conduct of the war might imply less than total support for the young men and women who were doing the fighting.

In the fantasy version, it’s easy to support the troops. What’s the personal cost to us to say, “I support the troops”? To fly the flag, to thank soldiers when they cross our paths, to pay for their meals and drinks, to give up our seat in first class. These are all fine and good as expressions of appreciation, and entirely appropriate. The troops absolutely deserve our support, and that was one of the many tragedies of Vietnam, the abuse that so many soldiers endured when they returned home. But let’s be real about what’s going on here. This is the easy part, the feel-good part, wearing lapel flag pins, thanking the soldiers and buying them drinks, flying the flag on Memorial Day. We can congratulate ourselves for being good and virtuous Americans, for doing our civic duty. We can feel secure in the knowledge that we’re patriots—in other words, that we love our country.

Okay, but what is love?

In my experience, real love, true love, involves pain, sacrifice, hardship, selflessness. That’s adult love, when all the fantasies and illusions get burned away, and you’re left with reality. That’s the kind of love you ultimately discover in marriage, if your marriage is going to have any chance of lasting more than a couple of years. That head-over-heels stuff, that hormone rush of infatuation and sexual buzz, that’s great, but it’s not love. It’s not really love until it hurts.

By the same token, how genuine can our patriotism, our love of country, be when the cost to us is so trivial?

In some ways, the war has never been more accessible to those of us at home. We can find it in the news; we can access the most graphic, horrifying images online. But I think that in a profound sense the war remains an abstraction unless and until we have skin in the game, a vital personal stake. Maybe it takes love to make war real. Maybe the reality of war isn’t really driven home unless we ourselves, or someone who we love very much, becomes directly involved.

In that sense, Vietnam was front and center in the lives of the majority of Americans. Every family with a draft-age son had a stake in the war. I remember my older cousins and neighbors, and the friends of my oldest sister, all sweating out the

draft lottery every year. We all knew someone who was serving, either a neighbor or a family member, and we were forced to think about the war in a very real way, to consider the reasons why it was being fought, and to look long and hard at the costs.

Contrast that with the wars of the past dozen years. Certainly the most striking difference is the absence of a draft, which means that most of us have been excused from thinking about the war in personal terms. Not only that, but no sacrifice was asked of us in other ways. We were told to go shopping, to spend money, to buy stuff. Not only were taxes not raised in order to fund the war effort, tax rates were lowered. Contrast that with the top tax rate during World War Two, which was—brace yourselves—ninety percent. That’s how you pay for a war. That’s how you share the sacrifice. That’s how you make it real in the life of the country.

In the past dozen years, you never heard the first mention, not a breath, about rationing. The heyday of the Hummer in Texas was during the first years of the Iraq war; you couldn’t drive down a street in Dallas without seeing at least one of those huge, heavy, gleaming vehicles trundling along, loaded up with chrome and steel. Meanwhile, back at the war, soldiers were driving around in Humvees that lacked appropriate armor, and the scarcity of effective body armor was a chronic problem for our soldiers. And as we all know, these days the Veterans Administration is seriously overwhelmed by the influx of veterans from the past dozen years of war. So if we really want to support the troops, how about if we slap a tax on every vehicle that weighs over a certain amount, or averages less than forty miles a gallon, and direct that stream of tax revenue to the VA?

Support the troops.

What do you suppose the life expectancy is of a country that’s lost its grip on reality? Whose national consciousness is based on delusion and fantasy? Whose dominant mode of expression is the language of advertising and sloganeering?

For you, cadets, this isn’t an academic or theoretical proposition. The course of your lives, and perhaps even whether you survive your twenties, depends on it. You’re of a generation that’s come of age in a time of constant war, a time that’s happened to coincide with the full flowering of the Fantasy Industrial Complex. You live directly on the fault line between the two, and that strikes me as a dangerous place to be. There are times when war is necessary, but in circumstances where the justification is less than clear, when, in fact, there’s serious question as to the necessity or wisdom of going to war, what then? How are you supposed to conduct yourself? How do you keep your conscience and your soul and your honor intact?

Given recent history, the odds are you're going to find yourselves in that exact situation. You may be required to lay your life on the line for reasons that you might very well suspect are the product of fantasy and delusion. I call that not just a crisis, but a tragedy. That's how lives are ruined and souls are shattered. We all have some idea of the kinds of things that are done in wars, the things that are hard to live with afterwards. Experience shows that it's hard enough to live with those things when the war was just. And if it was less than justified, imagine how much harder.

Of course, the obvious answer, the default answer to this dilemma, is that you follow orders, you do your duty no matter what. As Alfred Lord Tennyson writes in "The Charge of the Light Brigade," "Theirs is not to reason why/theirs is but to fight and die." It's a snooze of a line, but there's a lot of truth in it. Certainly it was true for British soldiers of the Victorian era, conditioned as they were to hierarchy and total devotion to the Queen.

But what about for you, young Americans? Your entire lives you've been taught the virtues of democracy and self-determination. The integrity of the individual. The right and imperative to question authority. It's not an accident that this is so ingrained in our culture. It started with the tradition of Protestant dissent that came over with the Puritans, that wonderful tradition of radical independence and rebellion against authority. All your life, the best examples have taught you that democracy requires us to be thinking, questioning, analyzing citizens. That it's not simply our right, but our obligation, to hold those in authority responsible for their actions, which is part and parcel of the notion of democracy—those in power govern only with the consent of the governed.

So then what happens? You graduate from high school, you go to the Air Force Academy, and all of a sudden you're reduced to the status of a serf! Or worse than a serf—you become a "doolie," from the Greek *doulos*, meaning: slave.

To be part of the military in a democracy, I've got to believe that requires living with a good deal of internal tension and psychological stress. I have a theory—probably not a very good theory, but nevertheless—that this tension might explain the American soldier's genius for profanity. It's a way of venting, giving expression to the sheer weirdness of having to balance two ways of being, the democratic and the authoritarian. I have to wonder if soldiers in authoritarian cultures as good as our soldiers at cussing. Say, the soldiers of North Korea with their blind obedience to the supreme leader, can they match our extraordinary eloquence? Maybe soldiers of all cultures have this genius for profanity, but what I do know for sure is that Americans have made it into an art form.

In any case, I think that psychological stress is real, and it may never be more acute than when you're told to put your life at risk for what you sense may be a fantasy, a delusion. Alfred Lord Tennyson doesn't cut it in America, not here, not in this day and age. "Theirs is not to reason why . . ." No. You're Americans. It's in your nature and your culture to ask why.

My sense is that one of the things the United States military excels at is training its soldiers to compartmentalize. Focus on the mission, the task at hand. Break it down into discrete parts and execute each one in turn. That may well get you through the moment. You might even be able to get through an entire war that way, but sooner or later, on some level, you're going to find the *why* question coming down on you. Sanity demands it. Human nature demands it, the American nature. We need our actions, especially actions as fraught as those done in war, to have meaning and purpose. If I'm going to die, I want my death to mean something. If I'm going to give up my legs or arms or a chunk of my sanity, it needs to have served a worthwhile purpose. But to ask young soldiers to sacrifice crucial parts of themselves for what—delusions and fantasies?

I call that obscene. It's morally obscene, and as a practical matter it can't help but corrupt the life of the country. You can't ask your youth to sacrifice themselves over and over for nothing without the country eventually rotting from cynicism and disillusionment.

What does "literature" have to do with any of this? Does it have anything to do with you, cadets, living as you are on that fault line between the ultimate reality of war, and that other reality, the dream reality produced by the Fantasy Industrial Complex?

Can literature make a country wiser, less prone to engaging in foolish wars? Could it affect, dare I say it, the political life of the country?

I can't speak for other writers, but when I wrote *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* I wasn't thinking that John McCain or Barack Obama would read it someday and start making policy based on what they found there, or that Dick Cheney would read it and suddenly realize, Oh my God, I was so wrong! Invading Iraq was a terrible idea!

Cadets, I'd be out of my fucking mind if I thought that.

So I'll ask again, what can literature do? Does it do anything, does it have a social function? Or is it just ornament, decoration, something to entertain us in our downtime?

First, let's be clear about what "literature" is. These days, when somebody says "literature," a lot of us can't help thinking of the English teachers who tortured us

in high school with grammar fascism and terrible translations of “Beowulf.” Or maybe we think of something rarified and dainty, something Oprah-ish about innermost feelings or the power of healing, I find myself clenching up whenever the word “literature” gets mentioned, because the modern connotations of the word seem so far removed from life as it’s actually lived. So how about if by “literature” we mean words that get down to the real stuff of life, the sweat and worry and blood and guts and sex and pain and pleasure of it, the down-in-the-dirt human tumble that we’re all going through at one time or another. So when we talk about “literature,” or “literary” qualities, we’re not talking about fancy turns of phrase or artifice or prettiness, but rather, meaning in the most profound sense. Writing that corresponds to the facts, to lived experience, with all its layers of past and present, motive and drift, conscious and sub-conscious. Writing that takes account of all the confusion and ambiguity and contingency of life. Writing that’s true to “discernible reality.”

So maybe that’s the value of writers, of “literary” writers—to preserve and protect the language. To see things as they truly are, and to find the language that describes those things as accurately and fully as possible, without sentimentality, or a political agenda, or a wish to please the reader.

In his book *The ABC of Reading*, Ezra Pound emphasizes that writing has meaning only to the extent that it corresponds to the thing being described. He goes on to define literature as “language charged with meaning,” and great literature, he says, is “language charged with meaning to the utmost degree.” In other words, the rhetoric matches the reality. Reality is a thing to be apprehended by clear seeing and clear language, which stands in exact opposition to Karl Rove’s imperial notion of reality, in which we get to “make” our own reality, and to hell with the facts, the messy truth of the situation.

A bit later in *ABC of Reading* Pound describes literature as “news that stays news,” and as an example he cites Homer’s *Odyssey*, one of the founding documents of Western literature, written some 2700 years ago.

Well, in essence, what’s the story of the *Odyssey*? It’s the story of soldiers trying to find their way home. They’ve been at war for ten years, and then they spend the next ten years trying to get home. Writing in the early 1920s, Pound noted that Homer’s portrayal of Odysseus’s companions seems to indicate they were suffering from what was called in the Great War, World War I, as shell shock. Of course, now we know that same affliction as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and it’s very much with us today. But writing some 2700 years ago, Homer’s vision was so acute, and

his language so true to the situation, that he was diagnosing an effect of war that was every bit as relevant in 3000 B.C. as it is now in 2013.

News that stays news.

I read something a while back, a statistic to the effect that one out of every three homeless people in the United States is a veteran. Well, that's the story of Odysseus and his companions, soldiers who are wandering, trying to get home. But these homeless people among us, these veterans, they're the ones who didn't make it all the way—they are, literally, homeless. So, the next time you're in Denver or San Francisco or New York and you see a bunch of homeless folks hanging out on the sidewalk, think about Odysseus and his boys out there wandering.

News that stays news.

What about the causes of war, the reasons for going to war—does Homer have anything to say about that? Let's look at what triggered the Trojan War. Sexy Helen, hot Helen, the super model of her day, runs off with Paris back to his hometown of Troy. When her husband Menelaus finds out, he goes to his brother King Agamemnon and says, Come on, let's get the army together, we have to invade Troy. Helen ran off with that turd Paris and we need to get her back.

Can you imagine a lamer reason for starting a war?

Agamemnon should have laughed in his brother's face. Dude, unh unh, no way, that's your problem. What you need is either a marriage counselor or a good divorce lawyer, but there's no way we're going to war just because you couldn't keep your wife happy.

But of course, that's not what he said. So the Greeks go to war for ten years to get Helen back.

Talk about a bullshit war.

Odysseus and his companions spend ten years fighting that war, then ten more years trying to get home when it's over. I wonder if Homer is saying something about bullshit wars, and whether that kind of war is harder for soldiers to come back from. Wars based on folly, fantasy, vanity; wars of choice as opposed to necessity. Maybe in the extreme difficulty they have in returning home, soldiers are manifesting some psychological truth about those kinds of wars that's deep in their bones.

The Trojan War.

Vietnam.

Iraq and Afghanistan.

News that stays news.

Okay, so what's been happening on the home front all these years, these twenty years that Odysseus has been gone? Well, his wife Penelope's been getting the hard sell from a bunch of guys who want to marry her. 108 of them, to be exact. Even worse, they've settled in right there at the house, so there they are 24-7, drinking Odysseus's wine, barbecuing his cows and sheep, abusing his servants, trying to sleep with his wife. Meanwhile, the man of the house is off fighting the war, doing his patriotic duty.

Homer goes to some pains to describe at least a few of these 108 men, and he makes it clear that they're the scions of the leading families of Ithaca. The leading families of Ithaca. The wealthy, the powerful, the well-connected. Well, why aren't they off fighting the war? Or did they get a pass because their families are wealthy, powerful, well-connected.

Sound familiar?

News that stays news.

Then when long-suffering, tough-as-nails Odysseus finally does make it home, he's changed so much that no one recognizes him, not even his wife. He's a stranger to them. How often have we heard that the past twelve years from wives and parents and friends of returning soldiers: He's a stranger. I feel like I don't know him anymore.

News that stays news.

Correction, somebody did recognize Odysseus—his dog. Argus was a puppy when Odysseus left, and now he's old and decrepit and can barely get around, but he recognizes Odysseus when no one else does.

Good old Argus.

So this poem, this very, very long poem that Homer wrote some 2700 years ago, is it just ornament, decoration? Something to read purely for pleasure and entertainment? Sure, it can be read taken that way, but suppose we're faced with a real crisis in our life. Suppose we're a young soldier trying to find his or her way back from the war, and we're struggling, and it may well be a matter of life and death. Suppose we're reading like our life depends on it, not in that numbed-out, Fantasy Industry frame of mind, but with our full attention. Maybe then it's not so much like entertainment, but the best chance we have of understanding our experience, of gaining a measure of peace in ourselves. A way to restore meaning when it seems meaning has been lost.

Or, say, we're a General, or a Senator, or even a President, faced with a geopolitical crisis that may involve force of arms. If he or she is willing to read with full attention and thoughtfulness—willing to read as if lives depend on it—maybe they'll come to

a fuller appreciation of risks and consequences, and of the potential for tragedy that's inherent in having great power.

Will reading Homer, or any work of literature, prevent unjust wars, unnecessary wars? Maybe yes. Maybe no. Maybe sometimes yes—and maybe that's the most we can hope for. It may well be that the reality connect of Homer, and writers like him, is the best shot we're going to get. So I would urge us all to read. To keep reading. Because we never know enough.

[Author's Note: This lecture owes much to the work of Mark Danner on language and war, particularly as found in his essays "What Are You Going to Do with That?", *The New York Review of Books*, June 23, 2005, and "Words in a Time of War," which may be found at [www.markdanner.com](http://www.markdanner.com)]

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**BEN FOUNTAIN'S** novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* was the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and the winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for Fiction. It was also a finalist for the National Book Award. He is the author, too, of *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*, a short story collection that received the PEN / Hemingway Award, among other awards.