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“It’s All Good”  
Forms of Belief and the Limits of Irony in  
David Finkel’s *The Good Soldiers*

“Less exposed than the civilian to new intellectual influences, the soldier is apt to retain firmly, or even to deepen, the impressions which made him, often reluctantly, a soldier in the first place. [...] How often, fatigued beyond endurance or horrified by one’s actions, does one not recur to those ideas for support and consolation! ‘It is worth it because —.’ ‘It is awful, but I need not loath myself, because —.’ We see things which you can only imagine. We are strengthened by reflections which you have abandoned. [...] We are your ghosts.”  
--R. H. Tawney, 1916

**I**n *The Good Soldiers*, Pulitzer prize winning journalist David Finkel chronicles the 15 months he spent embedded with the US Army’s 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry in Baghdad. Throughout the book, Finkel highlights two voices—those of the battalion’s commander, Lt. Col. Ralph Kauzlarich, and of then-president George Bush—that seem unrealistically positive about the American military’s position in Iraq in the spring of 2007. Each chapter of the book begins with a hopeful excerpt from one of the president’s speeches, and Finkel repeatedly quotes Kauzlarich offering his cheerful trademark phrase—“It’s all good”—in response to new challenges as they arise. These optimistic words are not presented in isolation, however. Instead, Finkel presents them in the midst

of a detailed day-to-day chronicle of the most dispiriting elements of the war as the soldiers in Kauzlarich's battalion experience them. At first glance, the point of this juxtaposition seems obvious: to undermine the leadership's optimistic declarations with accounts of the harsh realities on the ground and thus render their words ironic. Irony would hardly be a surprising move in this context, given the large role it has played in the long tradition of war literature. *The Good Soldiers*, however, is not that kind of a book; instead of simply undermining the leaders' optimistic declarations, Finkel reveals their complexity. He fully acknowledges the irrationality and offensiveness of optimism in the face of relentless bad news, but he also exposes the value of that optimism and refuses to let his readers dismiss it. As readers well-schooled in the ironic plot twists of famous twentieth century war literature like *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Catch-22*, it is easy to assume we are supposed to dismiss the optimistic declarations of President Bush and Lt. Col. Kauzlarich, but Finkel urges us to take them seriously. In so doing, he highlights a crucial limit to irony as a tool for conveying truths about war and combat.

The essay that follows consists of three parts. I begin by demonstrating how Finkel is using two traditional literary devices—dramatic irony and the naïve hero—to highlight the ironic possibilities of the story he's telling. Then, drawing on two extended examples from *The Good Soldiers*, I will argue that Finkel invites us to use dramatic irony as a tool for interpretation, only to then reveal its inadequacy for making sense of the story he is telling. In reversing the invitation to irony in the way that he does, I will suggest, Finkel is not just creating a structuring mechanism for his narrative, but creating a new kind of war book—or at least adding a new twist to the roles that irony can play in such books. The soldiers he depicts need to both believe and not believe; they need to commit themselves unreservedly to a single attitude or outlook even as they admit and accept the problems and difficulties involved in doing so. Irony and earnestness, skepticism and belief: it is these tense juxtapositions, rather than their resolution, that characterizes Finkel's soldiers and what they have to tell us about their experience of war.

The first step in understanding this picture of Finkel's book is to understand his use of dramatic irony and the figure of the naïve hero, elements which begin to emerge even in the book's first pages. *The Good Soldiers* opens with a lengthy account of the many things that have “not yet” happened to Lt. Col. Ralph Kauzlarich in April 2007, the very beginning of the battalion's deployment:

His soldiers weren't yet calling him the Lost Kauz behind his back, not when this began. The soldiers of his who would die were still perfectly

alive. A soldier who was a favorite of his, and who was often described as a younger version of him, hadn't yet written of the war in a letter to a friend, 'I've had enough of this bullshit.' Another soldier, one of his best, hadn't yet written in the journal he kept hidden, 'I've lost all hope. I feel the end is near for me, very, very near.' (3)

An opening like this sets up certain expectations about the kind of book that will follow, namely, that it will provide an example of "dramatic irony." As M. H. Abrams defines the term in his classic *Glossary of Literary Terms*, dramatic irony is

A situation in a...narrative in which the reader shares with the author knowledge of present or future circumstances of which a character is ignorant; in that situation, the character unknowingly acts in a way we recognize to be grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances, or expects the opposite of what we know that fate holds in store...(100)

By framing his story in terms of a future of which his protagonists are not aware, but we as readers are so, Finkel seems to be positioning Kauzlarich and his soldiers as figures in exactly the situation Abrams describes here, and this idea that Finkel is offering us a work of dramatic irony gains even more support as the book gets underway. As each of the book's not very optimistic chapters is introduced with an optimistic epigraph quoted from one of President Bush's speeches, and Kauzlarich begins to repeat his trademark phrase—"It's all good"—in the face of increasing evidence to the contrary, the tension between words and reality (between, as Travis Weiner puts it, "what they are being told their mission was, and what they experienced on a day -to-day basis") puts a great deal of pressure on these two figures (2). If the book announces itself as a work of dramatic irony, then President Bush and Kauzlarich would seem to be its pitiable protagonists: two version of the "naïve hero"

...whose invincible simplicity or obtuseness leads him to persist in putting an interpretation on affairs which the knowing reader...just as persistently is called on to alter or correct. (98)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Wilson, in a recent essay on *The Good Soldiers*, characterizes Finkel's presidential quotes in terms that directly echo Abrams' definition of the naïve hero. Wilson describes how "[e]ach of Finkel's chapters is [...] 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" (12).

The naïve hero is a fall guy, in this case one who might highlight the difference between what a leader of troops in Eastern Baghdad in the spring of 2007 *should* have known, and what he did know. With not one but two such fall guys in place, it's hard not to assume that Finkel's book will offer a textbook case of dramatic irony. In the end, however, Finkel is doing something rather different: inviting us to use dramatic irony as a tool for interpretation, only to then reveal its inadequacy for making sense of the story he is telling.

In reversing the invitation to irony in the way that he does, Finkel is creating a new kind of war book, or at least a new role for irony within such books. Irony has always played a role in the literature of war, but became especially important in the literature of World War I, and took on even broader literary significance in the decades following that war.<sup>2</sup> For a powerful school of literary criticism that emerged in these years, irony became a straightforward criterion of aesthetic value. New Critics like Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks scorned literary works “in which the writer commits himself or herself unreservedly to a single attitude or outlook, such as love or admiration or idealism” on the grounds that such works are vulnerable to a reader's “ironic skepticism” (Abrams 100). Praiseworthy works, on the other hand, “are invulnerable to external irony because they already incorporate the poet's ‘ironic’ awareness of opposite and complementary attitudes. In this value system, avoiding becoming the butt of an ironic joke is elevated from a personal or historical aspiration to an aesthetic ideal, and the aspiration has everything to do with the ways in which World War I was taking shape in the popular imagination in the years after the war: if innocence was partly to blame for making the war possible, then cynicism, wariness and irony were the best ways to avoid such results in the future.”<sup>3</sup>

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2 Paul Fussell offers the broadest and best known argument for irony's significance in British and American literature of the First World War, claiming that, as a result of this war, irony has become “an inseparable element of the general vision of war in our time” (33). Susanne Christine Puissant updates and extends his argument in *Irony and the Poetry of the First World War* (2009).

3 When Philip Larkin writes, in his often quoted 1964 poem “MCMXIV,” “Never such innocence again,” his words can thus be interpreted as both a lament for something valuable that has been lost, and as a resolution to avoid the mistakes of the past. The resolve is shared by the New Critics and helps explain why they champion poetry that is “invulnerable to... irony” because it already incorporates irony within itself (100). For more on the shape that World War I took in the post-war popular imagination, as well as those soldiers and scholars who dispute this dominant narrative, see Hynes, esp. Chapter 21 “The War Becomes Myth” (423-463) and Janet S.K. Watson's *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory and the First World War in Britain*.

It is this idealization of irony as an aesthetic and even moral virtue that Finkel critiques in *The Good Soldiers* by first inviting us to interpret his text ironically and then reversing that invitation. On the one hand, he makes us feel the difficulty—even the insanity—of “committing oneself unreservedly to a single attitude or outlook” in the context of Iraq in the spring of 2007. The soldiers he depicts are not naïve, and after a few weeks of deployment, few if any have the capacity or the will to commit themselves unconditionally to any single interpretation of what they are experiencing. On the other hand, though, Finkel also focuses his narrative on the words of two figures—Lt. Col. Kauzlarich and President George Bush—who seem to possess this capacity in spades. At first, as I have suggested, these characters seem to function merely as foils, naïve dupes whose role in the text is to show, by their lack of it, what a wise person should know or say or understand about war and its consequences. As the narrative unfolds, however, this initial interpretation becomes harder to maintain. These figures are infuriating and disconnected from reality and wrong, but they are also hope-inspiring and comforting and right. Most of all, their words are hard to dismiss. There are no atheists in a foxhole, or so the adage goes: instead, the pressure of combat urges soldiers to commit themselves “unreservedly to a single attitude or outlook.” For those who do so, irony becomes a very difficult position to maintain

This difficulty with irony is not at all clear upon a first reading of *The Good Soldiers*; on the contrary, Finkel initially seems to be offering irony as the only possible lens for interpreting the chronicle he’s presenting to us. The most obvious example of an irony that is almost too strong to resist comes in the quotations from then-president George W. Bush with which Finkel frames each one of his chapters. As Christopher Wilson notes in his recent essay on *The Good Soldiers*, “[w]hen we read one of Bush’s grand rationales, [...] we are repelled back to the ordinary, to the reality check of the foot soldier’s primary experience”(13). An ironic gap between rhetoric and reality is unavoidable here, as the war on the ground as it is experienced by soldiers is inevitably very different from the war as it is seen by politicians back in the U.S. On Sept 9, 2007, for instance, President Bush declares in a triumphant speech that “We’re kicking ass,” while on the same day three soldiers in the 2-16 are killed and two others wounded in an IED explosion. In Kauzlarich’s words: “One boom and an entire fire team was gone” (129). Both statements can be true, of course, because, as Finkel puts it: “In the US, the news [about the war] was all macro rather than micro” (128). The president’s words, nevertheless, are jarring. As one soldier describes the problem, “It’s hard to hear we’re making strides when I know the place hasn’t changed,” and in Finkel’s own words: “There were just

so many ways to describe this war, that was the thing” (184). In the case of this quotation and many others included in the book, the president’s words and the situation as the soldiers in Kauzlarich’s battalion experience it seem hopelessly far apart—two different pictures that can never be brought together.

Bringing them together, though, is just what Finkel does throughout the book, with interesting effects. Sometimes the effect is humorous—as when he connects the fluent metaphors of political speech with the banal details of everyday life:

On July 12, Kauzlarich ate a Pop-Tart at 4:55 a.m., guzzled a can of Rip It Energy Fuel, belched loudly, and announced to his soldiers, ‘All right boys, it’s time to get some.’ On a day when in Washington D.C., President Bush would be talking about “helping the Iraqis take back their neighborhoods from the extremists,” Kauzlarich was about to do exactly that. (92)

Here, the difference between the political description and the everyday reality is funny rather than upsetting. More often, though, Finkel uses the presidential quotes to show how even words that seem disconnected from on-the-ground realities can be brought to bear on them in a complicated but legitimate way. The book’s tenth chapter, for instance, begins with an epigraph from a speech on January 4, 2008, in which President Bush describes the basic goals he sees the war as trying to achieve. “Here’s what I tell people,” the President begins:

I tell people here in America that 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, a chance for the child to go outside and play and not fear harm. (199)

Finkel goes on to invoke the words of this passage several times in the chapter that follows it. The first invocation comes when he is describing the sleepless wives and mothers who gather at all hours of the night in a gazebo outside the Brooke Army Medical Center in Texas. A program manager at the center tells Finkel that “there might be as many as twenty women in the gazebo, no matter the season, no matter the weather” and Finkel then compares the president’s words to the women’s situation:

“A chance for that child to grow up in peace and to realize dreams” is what President Bush said any mother wants, but in the gazebo their wishes had been updated. Some would smoke. Some would drink. Some were on medication for indigestion, and most were on antidepressants. “Whatever it takes for a mother who spends twenty hours a day in the burn unit watching her son scream.” (202)

In this case, the words from the speech aren’t in direct opposition to the experience being described, nor is the juxtaposition humorous. Instead, Finkel is making words spoken in one context relevant in a very different one—beginning to bridge a gap between political rhetoric and everyday reality that at other points in the book has seemed unbridgeable. The simple desires that President Bush ascribes to these women have been forcibly modified by the war, but that doesn’t make his point wrong or laughable. At the very least, Finkel is taking the president’s words seriously here, and asking us to do the same.

Later in the same chapter, Finkel quotes the president’s words about mothers and children again, and this time it is in an even less ironic context. After Kauzlarich visits a terribly wounded soldier named Duncan Crookston at the medical center, he flies back to Iraq, “back once again [to] 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” (217). As soon as he arrives, Kauzlarich gets an email from Duncan Crookston’s mother, Lee, telling him that her son has died. Finkel then quotes Lee Crookston’s email word for word. The honesty of her sorrow and the earnestness of her words about her son’s life and death defy any possibility of irony:

We can take away from this experience the knowledge that good people exist in this world, that evil is worth fighting for that reason, and that Duncan was a proud example of a good person who did not stand by and allow it to flourish by doing nothing. (218)

In any other context, we would expect a politician’s polished rhetoric to be opposed to this woman’s heartfelt directness, but in using the President’s description to set the scene for Lee Crookston’s email, Finkel does the opposite. He is not mocking Bush’s words here, nor is he highlighting their failure to connect with the facts on the ground as he did in the “We’re kicking ass” case. Instead, Finkel simply confronts us with the fact that Iraq is a place where mothers want the same thing

for their children that an American mother wants—while it is also the place that killed Lee Crookston’s son, and the sons of many Iraqi mothers as well. President Bush is not wrong to say that women from both nations want the same thing, but Finkel highlights the fact that neither group is allowed to have it—and indeed, each is in some ways implicated in the process that robs the other of it. This scenario is ironic, but not in any simple or obvious way. Instead of using Bush as a fall guy whose “invincible obtuseness” we are “called on to alter or correct,” Finkel is doing something different (Abrams 98). We can’t correct Bush’s words here because they’re not wrong, and because Lee Crookston’s words confirm their truth, and yet at the same time we have to acknowledge that these mothers’ shared hopes for their children are being shattered, and that Bush’s own convictions about these mothers’ commonalities are helping fuel the same war that shatters their hopes. Because of this complexity, we can’t dismiss Bush as an ignorant dupe. Instead, his words reveal him to be both wrong and right, both worthy of our skepticism and of our heartfelt conviction.

Thus, while Finkel uses political rhetoric for ironic effect to a certain extent in the “We’re kicking ass” case, in the end he limits ironic possibility by forcing us to take the president’s words as straight as we take the words of a grieving mother. This same pattern of first opening and then closing down ironic possibility is even more strongly demonstrated in Finkel’s treatment of Kauzlarich’s trademark phrase: “It’s all good.” In the opening pages of the book, in the context of Kauzlarich’s rallying of his new troops, Finkel introduces the tag-line in relatively neutral terms, as “a nervous tic...or a prayer of some sort, or maybe...a declaration of optimism, simply that, nothing more” (6).<sup>4</sup> Kauzlarich, Finkel tells us, is a good leader—“Ask anybody” says his executive officer, “he has this dynamic personality about himself that people want to be led by him” (9). Coming from such a leader in Fort Riley Kansas and the Brigade’s early days in eastern Baghdad, such a catch phrase is tolerable, even endearing. By late July 2007, though, it is becoming a problem, at least for some of Kauzlarich’s troops. Attempting to rally his men during this later period, Kauzlarich calls a meeting with his company commanders and first sergeants, but it doesn’t go as planned. “You guys are living the dream right now,” Kauzlarich tells the men, in what Finkel describes as “the slow, precise diction he used when he was all about persuasion”: “You truly are living the dream...talk to your people about that...make sure they understand why we do what we do” (112).

<sup>4</sup> Kauzlarich acts optimistic, according to Finkel, “because he was optimistic, even though he was in the midst of a war that, to the American public, and the American media, and even to some in the American military, seemed all over in April 2007, except for the pessimism, the praying, and the nervous tics” (6).

The speech, Finkel says, was “classic Kauzlarich, full of belief,” like a great one he’d given back in Fort Riley all over again, but in the context of the battle front “more and more” of the people listening to it “weren’t understanding”(112). Sergeant Frank Gietz explains his uneasiness with Kauzlarich’s optimism in terms of its disconnect from the needs of the “kids” under Kauzlarich’s command:

Sometimes I wonder what kind of world the chain of command is living in. To think we’re winning? ... None of the kids believe in this anymore... The kids are hurting. The kids are scared. They don’t need the bravado. They need understanding. They need someone to tell them ‘I’m scared, too.’ (112)

It is at this point that the soldiers in one platoon start to refer to Kauzlarich as the “Lost Kauz,” while others begin to call him “President Bush.” As Finkel explains, the soldiers gave him these names “because of his ability to see what they couldn’t, and to not see what they could” about how badly things are going for them (112). In light of this name calling, Kauzlarich seems like a naïve hero to be corrected, not someone whose words we can take straight, and at several points in the book Finkel adds more evidence to support this assessment.

We see the same critique of Kauzlarich, for instance, when Finkel juxtaposes an early speech of his with the realities that confront him in Iraq. Back at Fort Riley before the Battalion had deployed, Kauzlarich’s optimism had been understandable, and even admirable. In words that foreshadowed President Bush’s, he had described the goal of the war in terms of the creation of a new Iraq, one in which

Iraqi children can go out on a soccer field and play safely. Parents can let their kids go out and play...Just like us. Being able to go out and do what we want to do and not being concerned about being kidnapped, accosted, whatnot. I mean, that’s the way the whole world should be. Is that possible? (15)

Kauzlarich’s question here, before the Battalion has left the US, seems reasonable enough. Later in the book, Finkel brings us back to the sentiment in this Fort Riley speech and calls it “hope as a question, forgivably sweet” (250). It becomes less forgivable and less sweet, however, in the context of March 2008 and in the face of another family:

—father, mother, two children—with filthy faces, in filthy clothing, huddled against a filthy wall on a filthy street, and was this the family Kauzlarich had in mind when he was still at Fort Riley talking about success?”(250)

If so, the answer to Kauzlarich’s question—“is it possible?”—seems clearly to be ‘no.’ And yet, Finkel tells us, Kauzlarich stubbornly persists in his optimism:

Even now, with the answer huddled in front of him against a wall, and now, at sunset, with more of the answer exploding around him in the form of a mortar attack that bloodied a few of his soldiers from flying shrapnel, and now, in the dark, as the attacks continued... (250)

Even now, Kauzlarich can get on the radio and say to his company commanders: “Overall today, a very successful day out on the battlefield” (250). At this point, his optimism begins to seem less admirable and more like a sign of profound disconnection from reality.

It is easy to see here why some readers might be tempted to write Kauzlarich off as a naïve hero, and why some of his soldiers might write him off as something worse. Sergeant Barry Kitchen aptly characterizes the problem with his commander’s point of view:

He thinks he’s gonna change the country. He thinks he’s gonna change all this. But he’s not. I mean, it’s good to believe, to a point, but when it comes to this? The whole country falling apart pretty much? One guy’s not gonna fix it. (246)

Another, angrier soldier expresses the same frustration more tersely:

I don’t ever want to see that mother fucker again[....]  
It’s bullshit. This war is complete bullshit. (197, 210)

If the words of the president were in danger of being rendered ironic by their distance from the facts on the ground, the danger seems even greater for Kauzlarich’s words of optimism. At least the president has the excuse of being thousands of miles away, and of being a politician rather than a soldier. Kauzlarich has neither of these excuses. In the terms of dramatic irony, Finkel seems to be

offering us a perfect example: Finkel's readers and Kauzlarich's soldiers both have reason to think they know something that Kauzlarich doesn't—or at least that he refuses to acknowledge. Like the naïve hero, he seems to be “unknowingly” acting in a way that is “grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances” in which he finds himself, his “invincible simplicity or obtuseness” leading him to “persist in putting an interpretation on affairs which the knowing reader...just as persistently is called on to alter or correct” (Abrams 98, 100). Despite all these hints about the problem with Kauzlarich's perspective, however, and the fact that his idealism is in some senses less forgivable (because less ignorant) than President Bush's, the same pattern we saw Finkel establish with the President's words holds true for Kauzlarich's: once again, Finkel tempts us to dismiss Kauzlarich's optimism, and once again, he shows us why we cannot do so.

This limiting of ironic response is demonstrated in another scene set at the Brooke Army Medical Center. Here, in some cases despite previously made vows to the contrary, all of the Kauzlarich's wounded soldiers come to meet with him and listen appreciatively as he gives an inspirational speech. It is exactly the sort of speech they might recently have mocked behind his back. “[N]ot this time, though,” Finkel tells us; it's not even that they merely listen, but rather that “this time they soaked up every word” (211). Like Lee Crookston's words, Kauzlarich's here are earnest, and like President Bush's words, their earnestness makes them vulnerable to cynicism when viewed from a distance. “Everything that you guys have done will not be in vain” Kauzlarich tells the wounded men:

“That's my sole purpose in life...The bottom line is I'm on your team, and I always will be. We are a family. You fought for me; I'll fight for you the rest of my life. Okay? Is that a deal?” They nodded. (211)

Like President Bush saying “We're kicking ass,” Kauzlarich's words here are both true and untrue. In both cases, we understand why soldiers might roll their eyes at such hopeful and potentially grandiose words; at the same time, though, we also understand why they might “soak them up.” The soldiers' circumstances prevent them from being too dismissive; no matter how much they might try to distance themselves from their leaders' potentially false optimism and promises, they still have to find a way to put one foot in front of another each day in an endless series of days in Iraq or in a military hospital. And no matter how much we, the readers, might want to distance ourselves from optimism we believe to be unwarranted, Finkel shows us why we, too, might instead need to take it seriously.

Towards the end of the book, Kauzlarich tells a story that illustrates this complex double value of unwarranted faith. The story concerns a man from Sierra Leone who so believes that a magic shirt will protect him from harm that he slices himself open with his own knife in a failed attempt to demonstrate its protective power. “That’s a form of belief,” Kauzlarich concludes, but it is also “a form of jackassery” (256). To insist, as Kauzlarich so often does, that “It’s all good” when he and his men know that it isn’t, is also both a form of belief and potentially a form of jackassery. The same double status holds for President Bush saying “We’re kicking ass” in the context of events which seem to belie that assessment. What is interesting in all three cases is that Finkel is both willing to admit the potential foolishness of these optimistic positions (the President’s, Kauzlarich’s, and even that of the man from Sierra Leone), and yet unwilling to let them be dismissed on those grounds.

Finkel’s ultimate point in first triggering and then thwarting our tendency to dismiss overly optimistic pronouncements would seem to be to warn us about a problem with such dismissals. Earnestness and optimism in the midst of the dire situations he describes may be naïve, but the opposite qualities—irony, cynicism and non-belief—are as bad or worse in their own way. Taking the president’s words completely straight, they are just propaganda, and looking at Kauzlarich from a certain angle, he is just a sociopathically cheerful Pangloss refusing to acknowledge the truth of his situation. Looked at from another point of view, however, these men’s words can be interpreted as declarations of hope, encouragement and commitment that are incredibly hard to say straight, but nevertheless worthy of our attention and respect. For President Bush to assert a clear and graspable justification for the war or Kauzlarich to affirm that all is well may both be lies of a certain sort, but it’s not clear that truth is what their speakers are after; these may be statements meant to help soldiers endure, and nothing more than that.

Nearly one hundred years before *The Good Soldiers* was published, the soldier and writer Richard Aldington offered a memorable defense of the value of balancing irony and earnestness in exactly the way Finkel does. Soldiers of the First World War, as Aldington represents them, are realists. They are not “duped by the War talk”—indeed “[t]hey laughed at the newspapers” and “[a]ny newcomer who tried to be a bit high-falutin was at once snubbed with ‘Fer Christ’s sake don’t talk patriotic!’”(256). Even with this ironic distance from the rhetoric about the war, however, these soldiers still go on fighting, and Aldington uses a now-classic phrase to characterize their endurance:

...in their stubborn despair—why, they didn't quite know[...]They went on with their sentimental songs and cynical talk and perpetual grousing; and it's my belief that if they'd been asked to do so, they'd still be carrying on now. They weren't crushed by defeat or elated by victory—their stubborn despair had taken them far beyond that point. They carried on. People sneer at the War slang. I, myself, have heard intellectual 'objectors' very witty at the expense of 'carry on.' So like carrion, you know. All right, let them sneer. (256)

Finkel's book seems at first like one that might have been written by the witty objectors Aldington describes here. It is easy to assume that, like them, Finkel is making fun of or at least pitying people for hoping and striving when we more savvy readers, with the benefit of hindsight, know their hopes will be disappointed and their efforts proven pointless. "It's all good," however, like Aldington's "carry on," really is a kind of mantra—a declaration of resignation as much as defiance and hope, but connected to an insistence on going forward. Of all that he sees during his time with the battalion, what compels Finkel most about the soldiers' endurance of the war is one of the most simple of facts: that they keep doing it. Like the soldiers Aldington describes, those in Finkel's book go on "in their stubborn despair—why, they didn't quite know." Finkel doesn't claim to know why they carry on either, let alone being able to explain it in words, but by relying on repeated, potentially ironic phrases in the way he does in this book, he is able to show us something about these soldiers that he never could have revealed otherwise.

Repeating the words of President Bush's assertions or Kauzlarich's catchphrase doesn't give them new meaning. Instead, it helps us recognize the particular moral effort involved in repeating actions which themselves have no obvious immediate value, but which bring the constant threat of death. In Finkel's own words: "watching soldiers, every day--knowing the EFP's<sup>5</sup> were out there, knowing the effects—just get in a Humvee to go out, once again....watching... [that] was just chilling. It was bravery. It was maddening. It was admirable. It was fear-inducing. There they went again" (Charlie Rose). As Finkel depicts it, it is impossible to belittle the difficulty of such repetition or those who commit themselves to it. These men's dedication may be "maddening" and, like the naïve hero's, "grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances"—it may even be crazy—but it is also not something to be sneered at. Finkel is not, like the author of a work of dramatic irony, calling upon

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5 An Explosively Formed Penetrator (EFP) is a type of explosive charge designed to penetrate armor.

his readers to “alter and correct” the actions of his naïve protagonists; instead, he is asking us to bear witness.

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