

## Reflections on *Redeployment*

I wanted to read Phil Klay's *Redeployment*. I was hesitant to alter the arc of my own experience. But I heard the interviews, I listened to the snippets on the radio, I read the rapt reviews. In the end, I picked it up. I wanted to see if *Redeployment* resonated with me like it seemed to with everyone else. Could our wars, our experiences, be that different?

Reading Klay's *Redeployment* was like looking into a broken mirror. There were reflections of me in every piece, but I could not assemble the pieces into a whole. Klay's fractured creations are all veterans broken by their wars; I am more than the sum of the parts. Klay's collection of short stories are popular, award-winning, but nonetheless form only part of the experience, creating instead incomplete reflection burdened by stereotypes.

Stereotypes are typically grounded in a kernel of experiential truth, but they are only a narrow view of reality. While they are highly persuasive, stereotypes are also distinctly unhelpful. *Redeployment* validates popular fears that all veterans return from war disturbed and broken and confirms the belief of many Americans in the absolute futility of our recent wars. Klay's stories show us small, shattered pieces when the full truth is that not all come back from war broken.

Most mornings, as I look out the window of the metro during my ride into the city, my mind drifts, studying nothing in particular as the buildings pass by. Some days, if it is sunny and if the sky is the right shade of blue, I catch myself tearing up.

I do not understand that part of me just yet.

Though not wounded, I am clearly changed by my experiences. Over the last fourteen years I've ranged from Yemen to Afghanistan and more than a few places in between. I served as an advisor to foreign militaries wrestling with their own brushfires on the periphery of our nation's own, larger conflicts but also embedded in the heart of our own war, advising Afghans at the ministerial level as they worked to reestablish governance in the vacuum created by our intervention. Turmoil has carved a distinctive mark across many of the countries I've traveled. It has marked me as well.

A standout in my mind is actually Haiti, where an earthquake—not war—left an entire city smashed and more than a hundred thousand people dead in a few moments one January afternoon. I wrestle with this, the inability to completely articulate how I've changed, but I am not worried about understanding all of it just yet. In this I differ from the walking calamities in Klay's book; I have gone downrange nearly a dozen times and "redeployed" just as many. For me, the process is not over. Some days I think about going back, about redeployment.

Redeployment for Klay's subjects means the end of their physical wartime experience but certainly not the end of their wars. It is the era that passes after the coming home, be it days or years, during which they grapple with or more often than not, succumb to their experiences at war. Redeployment for me—and for thousands of other servicemembers—does not mean coming home. It means going back to whichever country needs American boots on the ground this week. Redeployment is not the end, rather it is the beginning of the next cycle. For many of us, redeployment is a dark moon relentlessly pulling the tide ashore just before dawn. It is the endless cycle of going back out and then the coming home again. Klay's *Redeployment* leads readers to believe that the tide has gone out forever leaving the beach strewn with the empty shells of war-torn veterans.

Unable to interact with their wars in a meaningful way, Klay's characters are instead acted upon. Victims all, they have no agency, no ability to affect change or discern meaning from their experiences. The wars simply wash over them. In portraying veterans this way Klay presents to the American public a homogenous bloc of physically and emotionally shattered veterans. This is inaccurate.

*Redeployment*, a work of fiction, captures *a truth*. But it most certainly is not *the truth*. The reality is that not every veteran of Iraq or Afghanistan returns dead or traumatized; nor are these wars over.

Although Klay is a veteran, his book was not written for anyone who carried a rifle or kicked dirt under the GWOT banner in the last decade. His stories bolster the dominant social narrative and in the process do both veterans and non-veterans

an injustice. He has reinforced the simplistic, but compelling idea that all veterans return from war traumatized by combat—or worse yet, by the combat they did not experience. He pigeonholes the veteran as dysfunctional, abusive, dependent, and violent. The only character who Klay allows to survive the war with a better understanding of the world into which he has been cast is, ironically, a civilian.

There is no doubt that some veterans return physically and emotionally damaged by their experiences, but just as many of us return stronger. Furthermore, thousands of us are still serving, still going back to the places where Klay's veterans were dealt such devastating blows. These characters are missing from Klay's book.

Also missing from *Redeployment* are the people who live in the places his characters go to war. We learn nothing of the Iraqis or the Afghans who play a central role in the experience of both fictional and real veterans alike. In fact, the entire book could have been written without a single reference to Iraq or Afghanistan. It is as important for readers to see the place in which these injuries occurred as it is for them to see the veterans draw meaning and value from their experiences, as well as from the people and places which shaped them. By omitting these characters and settings Klay ignores an enormous population of veterans who strived to understand their surroundings and dehumanizes both the people Americans are sent to fight, as well as the ones they were ostensibly sent to help.

Without this, we are left with only one perspective on how veterans viewed the spaces in which they served. Iraq and Afghanistan are not simply vast deserts we see in movies where Americans were sent to kill. There are cities, and people—whole cultures and societies that emerged centuries before America even became a country. And yet these places and cultures are treated with seeming indifference in Klay's book, as if American involvement marks the beginning of their history.

As this war stretches into its fifteenth year the American public remains woefully uninformed about Afghanistan and Iraq. While the wars may have notionally improved the average American's sense of geography, they did nothing for their concept of world history or our nation's place in it. For many, Iraq and Afghanistan have been reduced to political entities that are negatively associated with the longest war in American history; they remain Eastern and other, utterly incomprehensible. The truth of Iraq and Afghanistan, and their citizens is lost, buried under violent images and stories of corruption, opaque to the war-weary citizenry.

Klay is not ignorant of the effects of war, but his book paints an incomplete picture, one that does a disservice not only to veterans and citizens but also to the countries where these wars were fought, their inhabitants, their place in history, and their future.

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