

Abstraction and the rewriting of civilian victimization by wartime media

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Phase II of the Ph.D. Program in Educational Studies, Lesley University.

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For Hecuba of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, the Trojan War was not about the great heroic deeds of Achilles or Hector, not about bravery or martial prowess. She reduces the same war which spawned the heroic *Iliad* to merely the "quest of that hateful wife of Menelaus...the cause why I, the hapless Hecuba, have wrecked my life upon this troublous strand."¹ Euripides' play centers not on warriors but on the civilian victims of Troy, the wives and daughters who are left to mourn their dead husbands and sons before becoming slaves to their conquerors. Today's news and political media may well be the inheritors of the Homeric, "Iliadic" view of war, one which focuses on acts of bravery and sacrifice among soldiers and crimes committed by kings, minimizing or eliding entirely the civilian experience, often for the purposes of propaganda. In light of the fact that "90% of the casualties in any war are civilians,"² according to a 2003 statement from Senator Biden, top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the perspective of modern day Hecubas, however absent from contemporary media, would seem vital if we wish to truly understand war's impact.

Jodi Eichler's September 12th memoir "The Lights are Out on Broadway" represents the newly re-awakened perspective, since September 11th, 2001, of the American domestic victim, while author Betoool Khedairi's semi-autobiographical novel, *A Sky So Close*, provides examples of civilian war victim narrative from Iraq. Like Hecuba, both of these writers are women who played no part in the military decisions that led to their respective crises, but now find themselves victims of the "collateral" effects of war. Neither of these two women were present at the immediate epicenter of their respective attacks – Eichler was at Columbia University when two terrorist-

commandeered airliners crashed into and destroyed the World Trade Center towers, while Khedairi's narrator is abroad in London when she receives letters from loved ones caught in the 1991 US and allied bombing of Iraq. Both women arguably carry just enough critical distance to comment with some objectivity, yet are close enough emotionally to the direct victims to produce a "genuine" response. Yet even their "genuine" response must do battle with the perspectives in the media they view, causing them to doubt the legitimacy of their own experience.

Eichler's initial reactions as a Manhattan resident to the September 11th attacks were horror and shock: "So this is what hell is like?"³ Khedairi's narrator (she is never named) also uses the language of the infernal to describe conditions, resonating with a note in an English magazine that says, "Hell is a box whose lid has been opened."⁴ Yet in each woman's narrative, the stark description of carnage and rubble vies with a concurrent difficulty in accepting the very reality of the war around them, a view of events with a certain absurdity, thanks to the influence of media. Eichler struggles and ultimately fails to reconcile physical reality with the too-often seen images of movie war clichés, while Khedairi's characters seem to have a keener ability to contrast between their own experience and the constructed media* images that claim to be the same experience.

* For the purposes of this paper, "the media" will be used as shorthand for the presentation of these dominant voices, and the vague and abstracting, sometimes overtly propagandistic language they use. Given the extent of government and news media collaboration in recent years (eg – "embedded" reporters, news stations CNN and CBS accepting advertisements from the US Army, etc), I feel comfortable equating them in this paper, especially in light of studies like FAIR's May/June 03 analysis of the Gulf War II coverage by six major news sources (BBC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, CNN's Wolf Blitzer Reports, Fox's Special Report with Brit Hume, and PBS's NewsHour With Jim Lehrer) which found, "Official voices, including current and former government employees, whether civilian or military, dominated network newscasts, accounting for 63 percent of overall sources. Current and former U.S. officials alone provided more than half (52 percent) of all sources; adding officials from Britain, chiefly in the invasion of Iraq, brought the total to 57 percent....of a total of 840 U.S. sources who are current or former government or military officials, only four were identified as holding anti-war opinions." In addition, "Nearly two thirds of all sources [cited in by reporters in their coverage], 64 percent, were pro-war, while 71 percent of U.S. guests favored the war. Anti-war voices were 10 percent of all sources, but just 6 percent of non-Iraqi sources and

Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, Eichler writes, “I feel that I have stepped into [the Billy Joel song] ‘Miami 2017’ The lights are out on Broadway tonight and who knows when the shows will reopen. We have all watched the mighty skyline fall. Over and over and over on our television sets, until we can't tell if the image is real or just some awful B-movie of the week catastrophe.”

Eichler’s Iraqi counterpart “Madame”, a friend writing to Khedairi’s narrator from Baghdad, remarks that “daily life has become like a series of photographs passing quickly through our memories, stopping at the end of the day with the image of a deserted, burnt-out tank.”⁵ For Madame, the tank is a real, physical object that interrupts the “photograph” fiction. Eichler, even when presented with evidence like churches covered in rubble and people fleeing in the streets, still has to struggle to keep 9/11 from becoming another Jerry Bruckheimer disaster movie, trying to reconcile the scenes she has seen firsthand with those on the television:

...I realized how long it had taken me to absorb the images and start to become numb...And slowly, the media archetypes that come with every story, every disaster, started to take over as information increased, and a tiny part of me wanted to believe that this was just another news story, almost scripted and unreal, with all of the clichés: the on the ground reaction. The interviews with rescue officials. The government response. The speculation [too quick!] about a culprit. And most comically, the talks with people streaming northward and trying to get home, seeming like a normal commuter reaction story. Except the folks were all covered in dust.⁶

3 percent of U.S. sources. Thus viewers were more than six times as likely to see a pro-war source as one who was anti-war; with U.S. guests alone, the ratio increases to 25 to 1.” On Larry King Live, 4/14/03, CBS Anchor Dan Rather “openly declared the partisanship of his coverage [by stating] ‘Look, I’m an American. I never tried to kid anybody that I’m some internationalist or something. And when my country is at war, I want my country to win, whatever the definition of “win” may be. Now, I can’t and don’t argue that that is coverage without a prejudice. About that I am prejudiced.’” (Rendall, Steven and Broughel, Tara. “Amplifying Officials, Squelching Dissent, FAIR study finds democracy poorly served by war coverage.” *Extra*. May/June 03. New York: Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting)

Khedairi's characters seem to have no such trouble:

Images of Baghdad. In the morning it's choking in the thick smoke; at night it's illuminated by balls of fire that roll around on the television screens. The news reports are crowded with information about trenches, levers, vehicles, ammunition, tools, tanks, transporters, towing equipment, diggers, wires, explosives, camps, and experimental training.⁷

Because of the more prolonged and more pervasive nature of the Gulf War relative to the 9/11 attacks, Madame and Khedairi's other friends in Baghdad speak of shortages, deaths, and suffering over the long term, while Eichler struggles to come to terms with one singular, time-limited event.* While for Eichler, the direct danger is already past, Khedairi's characters endure days and days of trauma, to the point where they

...lost all features of modern civilization, except our bicycles, which have become the cheapest form of transport. We try to avoid the streets overflowing with the stench of dying frogs.... We've acquired new habits. Shrapnel stopped us from sleeping on the rooftops. We are put off from eating fish; polluted from nibbling corpses in the Shatt al-Arab River. Some people have started sleeping with their mouths open. They fear sudden death from the transmitted blast of a nearby explosion... a story went around [that a man survived a blast] because his mouth allowed the blast wave to travel through his body without causing internal injuries.⁸

Yet even when faced with such continual physical reminders of the war's effects on them, Khedairi's characters seem to struggle no less than Eichler to negotiate the tension between media euphemism and reality:

A television screen flickers in the corner of the shop. A map of the Middle East is laid out, decorated with groups of tanks, armored personnel carriers, military units, equipment, and soldiers. Caricatures of the American president and the

* Of course, trauma lingered in Manhattan long after the attacks themselves, in the form of pollutant-related illness, economic hardship, and the psychological impact of fear and an increasingly martial culture. Still, the actual physical attacks, for Eichler, ended after one day, while Khedairi's characters face renewed attacks daily.

Arab Nations compete to make it onto the covers of the news magazines. Live coverage of the daily activities from the area flow all over the media channels.⁹

These characters have not personally experienced any engagements between military units on the front-lines, yet the images they see on their television screens are the “large picture”, the movement of troops on maps that must seem so distant and removed from the civilian men who lay on roofs, holding their mouths open for fear of the blasts. Even further removed are the American and Allied soldiers, whom Khedairi paints, contemptibly, with a childlike innocence and glee:

The American pilots return unharmed to their bases in Saudi Arabia. Iraq does not retaliate; it merely resists the American air strikes... The Post Office and the Ministry of Defense were among the early targets. The young [American] pilots announce their complete satisfaction. One of them comments, “Bombing Iraq was like lighting up a Christmas tree!” Another pilot says, “The first attack was like a game of football. At first a player hesitates because he’s afraid and hasn’t got any self-confidence, but after you press the button for the first time, you get into the game and start attacking.” A third pilot describes his share of the bombardment, saying, “I transformed the area into flaming balls of hellfire!”¹⁰

Eichler, were she consulted, might not be surprised by the reactions of these pilots. Even as a victim of war, Eichler struggles to accept its reality, falling so easily into “B-Movie clichés.” Even when she attends a Church service for the dead, hearing the “bells ringing over and over and over again, not just because it was noon,”¹¹ those bells fail to awaken her to reality, and in the final analysis she describes the situation as “absurd.”^{*} If Eichler, nearly at ground zero and surrounded by death and crisis still

* Eichler’s worries seem like a perfect example of Jedediah Purdy’s observations about her generation in his book, *For Common Things*, constantly suspecting “that our feelings, even those we would like to think are most intimate, are somehow trite before we express them... Irony is powered by a suspicion that everything is derivative” from something we have seen in the media. For Eichler, reacting in earnest would only be to mimic the reactions of a fictive disaster movie heroine – or victim.

cannot fully comprehend the reality of what is happening, then for the American pilots, whom Khedairi describes as completely removed and sheltered (“The soldiers in the American camps send greetings to their families at Christmastime. A brief short shows them brushing their teeth in the desert near the Saudi borders ; they rinse their mouths out with mineral water.”)¹², the civilian war experience is absolutely impossible to see in human terms. For them it is a Christmas tree, a football or video game. They see no streets overflowing with dead frogs, no population reduced to riding bicycles and hunting for clean water. Thanks to sanitized media coverage, neither does the American public. For Khedairi’s characters, these realities are unavoidable -- so long as they do not watch the Western news.

The very reality-altering properties of the media make it *desirable* for Eichler as a means of escape, even as she claims to try and resist them:

...as night came I got really scared again. We finally turned off the TV, we couldn't stand it. But I can't stand the quiet either. Every time I hear a plane--even though I know they are military planes--- I panic. Irrational, terrified thoughts started settling in. Usually I turn to TV to calm down, get outside of myself. Today was not so easy. But somehow, we found a "Golden Girls" rerun. I have never in my life been so happy to see Betty White.¹³

Here lies the fundamental difference in the two women’s narratives: Eichler permits herself, and is able to indulge in, the escape provided by the media, in this case a sitcom in which real suffering is entirely nonexistent. For Khedairi’s characters, the disconnect between media and reality produces only cynicism and bitterness. As the state-run television and papers continue nonstop assurances of Iraqi victory (as much an “alternate universe” to a civilian’s personal experience as the Western media), the people in Khedairi’s Baghdad only sink deeper and deeper into despair and cynicism as the war

continues: “People in the streets are confused and everyone asks what the future holds. Depression is available for everyone, free of charge...I can hardly believe that I am midway to seventy. That is how cynical we are when describing our ages these days.”¹⁴

The September 11th attacks, perhaps, did not shatter the American assurance of safety as much as they have been credited to. Even Eichler, an “unbeliever,” can don the media cloak of denial, of distance and abstraction, as a palliative:

We realized we should eat no matter how we felt and stopped at our local Chinese food place for take out. The place was hopping. Hopping. Packed. The conversations were excited, the radio was on, but it was like some bizarre holiday. It gave me some sense of pride-- New Yorkers will not cower in their homes...¹⁵

Here, even at the site of an attack, the victims choose to hear about it second-hand via radio, using it as a means to unite a community. For Americans outside of Manhattan, no other option existed. A shortly post-9/11 survey of 1,000 US consumers by MediaComPulse, a monthly media trends research report released by MediaCom Future Group, reported that 70% of Americans polled listed themselves as “more likely to pay attention to the media throughout the day”, a figure which dropped down to 52% a year later.¹⁶ What “united” America seemed not to be increased patriotism, but rather increased participation in the constructed reality of the media, a reality that depends upon a certain level of abstraction, carried out to all corners of the country by television, newspapers, and “United We Stand” bumper stickers.* What better evidence of the

* In the true style of Orwellian “political language” or Cohn’s “techno-strategic discourse”, the precise definition of that phrase seems elusive. Exactly what are Americans united in standing for, or against? Ross Perot’s 1992 presidential campaign named its organization “United We Stand America” as an opposition to dominant government policies. In 2001, the phrase now apparently carries some message to support the establishment at all costs. Retired English Professor Gary Sloan offers the following musings about the phrase’s vagueness: “Are ‘Let Freedom Ring’ and ‘United We Stand’ logically compatible? If everyone exercises freedom of speech and conscience, will we all stand united? Instead of assenting to the war against Iraq, some may opt to ring their dissent.”

media's sway over the American sense of reality than when the public produced "overwhelming support for war in Afghanistan" for their culpability in the 9/11 attacks¹⁷, only to have 2/3rds of the public respond to a CBS poll two years later, in a reversal of Orwellian proportions, saying they believed that Iraq was the agency that destroyed the World Trade Center?¹⁸

George Orwell's observations a half-century ago seem to still apply to contemporary political speech and writing, as, even when they are not actively re-writing history, they still

are largely the defense of the indefensible...[or that which] can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism...Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.¹⁹

Media accounts of war that employ what Carol Cohn calls "techno-strategic discourse" are the contemporary successor to the "phraseology" that Orwell describes. Cohn attributes such language to those who wield weapons, or who identify with those wielders, gaining "the distance afforded by abstraction, the sense of control afforded by mastering [language]."²⁰ It was the very language defense intellectuals used, Cohn found, that gave them such power. As one of 48 college teachers participating in a two week workshop on nuclear weapons and doctrine hosted by civilian government officials and advisors, and interviewing such figures for a year afterwards, she found these men

would not take her seriously unless she partook in their specialized language. As she learned this “techno-strategic” mode of expression, she grew to realize the structure of language afforded no words or phrases for detailing the horror, in Hecuba’s human terms, that nuclear war entailed.

In her 1987 publication “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals”, Cohn compares two accounts of the aftermath of a hypothetical nuclear attack, one which describes “flames that were beginning to lick their way up” and “figures” that “loom up, black, hairless, faceless. They screamed with voices that were no longer human. Their screams drowned out the groans rising everywhere from the rubble, groans that seemed to rise from the very earth itself.”²¹ The other account describes a “nuclear environment, a situation bound to include EMP blackout, brute force damage to systems, a heavy jamming environment, and so on.” Cohn concludes that “there are no ways to describe the phenomena represented in the first [account] with the language of the second,” blaming this problem on “the difference in perspective...the speaker in the first is a victim of nuclear weapons, the speaker in the second is a user.” Thus, abstract language is the language of aggressor, not victim.

To maintain national self-esteem, the official news media and government propaganda of any country will tend to employ the “techno-strategic” language of the “weapons users” – for example, the following statement from Senior Fellow at the Ayn Rand Institute Onkar Ghate, who writes in 2002 that

[t]o be victorious in war, a free nation has to destroy enough of the aggressor to break his will to continue attacking (and, then, dismantle his war apparatus and replace his government). In modern warfare, this almost always necessitates "collateral damage," i.e., the killing of civilians.²²

Ghate not only uses the popular contemporary Orwellian or “techno-strategic” style euphemism, “collateral damage”, to distance himself from those civilian victims, but furthermore collapses an entire nation of millions, through metonymy, into one single person – “the aggressor” (who notably lacks a proper name), the breaking of whose singular “will” is the goal of mass-killing. The recent construction of Iraq in American consciousness as an “enemy nation”, against whom every attack hurts only a super-metonymized “Saddam”, epitomizes this abstraction, discounting or even outright erasing all traces of the “Madames” in Baghdad.

With voices like Ghate dominant in public media, responsibility might seem to fall upon the literary world to represent Cohn’s “first perspective,” that of the individual civilian victim. Can the “messenger from heaven” in Mark Twain’s “War Prayer” be anything but a metaphor for the literary author when he attempts to remind a war-enthused mob that “when you have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory--*must* follow it, cannot help but follow it”? He cautions them that, when they pray for victory, they are also asking God to -

...help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it....²³

Whether through fiction like Twain’s or historical narrative like John Hershey’s *Hiroshima*, the task of humanizing the civilian now seems to fall to the author and not the reporter or newscaster, to Jodi Eichler or Betool Khedairi rather than Dan Rather or Walter Cronkite. Authors can, in theory, paint the up-close and personal, non-abstracted war without the same self-interested need governments (and embedded media fed directly

from the government party line's trough) feel to "protect" the masses from the realities of war. So powerful is their non-abstracted picture that literary critic and Regular Army Lieutenant Colonel Peter Jones worries that

...the novels of war offer so compressed and distilled a view of actual people forced to live and die as though these blood rituals were an ineluctable law of nature that...we are compelled to recognize the all-pervasiveness of...the inevitability of recurring wars forever and ever.²⁴

Jones' fears, that a non-abstracted picture of war's horror, as found in the "war novels" he examines, will in fact lead to a perpetuation of war itself, or at least a resignation to its inevitable place in human affairs, seem far less compelling than Hermann Goering's infamous assertions that government propaganda, not literary works, perpetuate war:

Why, of course, the people don't want war.. Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece? Naturally, the common people don't want war...But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship...the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.²⁵

Goering, who as second-in-command of the Third Reich would seem to have a good deal more experience in war propaganda than Jones, echoes Orwell and Cohn's theories that abstraction furthers war, while a detailed picture (especially one which includes the death and suffering of civilians) hinders it. The contemporary American phrase "War on Terror" lacks definition and specificity in the very sense Orwell describes, and its critics have received the denunciation for lack of patriotism* that Goering cites. Judging by

* Among the most memorable of such denunciations is Attorney General John Ashcroft's December 2001 testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee: "To those who would scare peace loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists, for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve", or

President George W. Bush's continued high approval ratings in foreign policy at the time of this writing, the media campaign surrounding "War on Terror" appears to be succeeding in producing sustained public support for military engagements, even without tangible results such as the capture or confirmed death of the 9/11 attacks' apparent architect, Osama Bin Laden, and in the face of a growing quagmire in reconstructing post-Saddam Iraq. Literature, here, is not sustaining war - politicized abstraction is.

Khedairi, as an Iraqi voice, sees (or allows herself to see, or can't help but see) the disconnects between what American media presents and the human cost of war more plainly, and finds not palliation but anger, when walking in London or watching Western television she sees prosperity and contrasts it with the never-shown deterioration in Iraq. The danger of Americans failing to see that particular contrast is plain: if the shaping of language and image in the media can numb you to civilian suffering *when you yourself are experiencing it*, ala Jodi Eichler, then how amazingly easy it must be for CNN's sanitized coverage of "Shock and Awe" to numb a person to civilian deaths thousands of miles away? When 3,000 dead civilians in the 9/11 attacks become not individuals but "heroes" and "martyrs", when their real life images of suffering are replaced with an endlessly replayed snapshot of firefighters hoisting a flag and senators singing the national anthem, such "positive dehumanization" may ironically make the "negative dehumanization" of the 6,000 Iraqi civilians killed in Gulf War II²⁶ as "collateral damage" all the easier.

Orwell writes that "This invasion of one's mind by ready-made phrases... can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them, and every such phrase

President Bush's more simply stated message in a November 2001 press conference with French President Jacques Chirac: "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror."

anaesthetizes a portion of one's brain.” Cohn goes further and warns that we must not only be watchful but actively attempt “a deconstructive task”, “pay[ing] close enough attention to techno-strategic discourse that we might begin to know how to dismantle it.”²⁷ If Eichler is any indication, however, the most direct victims of war violence in America may ironically be the least likely to *want* to dismantle such discourse, for fear of losing a major psychological coping tool. Those not directly affected, of course, do not even have the personal experience for a basis of comparison, and those in power, whether they have such a basis or not, have vested interest in erasing the human dimension, as Goering explained, in order to persuade its population to permit a war.

Media and language manipulation can corrupt direct experience of soldiers, as well as civilians, to create an “illusion of the genuine” – Khedairi’s Madame remarks with irony, “Isn’t it strange the Americans are calling themselves ‘Desert Rats’? We always thought of them as the ‘Nivea Cream Soldiers.’”²⁸ Thus a few weeks of experience with desert conditions are transformed into “desert ratdom”, hyperinflating a kernel of genuine experience to a point where a US Soldier’s connection to Iraq becomes equated with that of a permanent resident. The blurring of lines between the soldier and civilian experience is dangerous, as it opens doorways to ignoring any differences between the two during wartime. Onkar Ghate seems to do just that when he equates merely living in a country from which terrorists operate with being in a “terrorist country”, and thus being a terrorist oneself, when he writes -

To win the war on terrorism, we must not let a mistaken concern with “innocents” deter us. As a free nation, we have the moral right to defend ourselves, even if this requires mass civilian deaths in terrorist countries.²⁹

“Mass civilian deaths”, however, include in their death toll victims like Jodi Eichler and Betool Khedairi. Without either woman’s writing, we would have no alternative picture to the media world of buzzwords. Any act of deconstruction like Cohn advocates needs to be informed by personal, humanizing experiences – experiences that, despite pervasive world violence, may ironically be swiftly vanishing as the victims themselves construct their experiences with the “techno-strategic” words and images provided to them by the media. It is seductively easy and reassuring, when faced with the indescribable horrors of war, to accept pre-packaged ways of constructing it in the same way one would accept a package of food and medical aid. But like the often-confused “yellow packages” dropped in the past few US Military engagements, harmful bomb fragments might lie within that can destroy the human essence of one’s own experience, leaving only a shell of catch-phrases and martial imagery.

However, Khedairi’s experience seems to suggest there are limits to such reality transformation. Her characters endure such repeated and long-term war trauma (both during the Gulf War and earlier in the book, when they experience the decade-long war between Iran and Iraq) that the media images they see become less transformative and more ridiculous by comparison.* Of course, living under constant and brutal wartime conditions hardly seems a preferable means of escape from media-dictated reality – but it does suggest that, if more and more American lives become affected by civilian war trauma, direct experience might outpace the power of media propaganda. A less drastic

* Elements of Iraqi culture and experience may also push individuals to be more critical of news media, domestic and foreign, than Americans, despite Purdy’s claims of an American youth consumed and rendered impotent by their sense of irony. Such a cross-cultural examination is beyond the scope of this paper.

option, perhaps, is to heed the words of Euripides, Twain, Khedairi and their like in the literary world, letting literature perform its job of providing vicarious experience – enough to instill empathy and in doing so perhaps stop war, before war comes to a civilian's doorstep and gives her an undeniable dose of the real thing.

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