



## REPRESENTATIONS OF THE IRAQI “OTHER” IN THE IRAQ WAR (2003-2011): MEMOIRS WRITTEN BY AMERICANS<sup>1</sup>

AMERİKALI YAZARLARIN IRAK SAVAŞI (2003-2011) ANLATILARINDA IRAKLI “ÖTEKİ” TEMSİLİ

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### Abstract

Life narratives are the perfect literary vehicle to observe conceptions of national identity. American politicians who served during the Iraq War (2003-2015) had the tendency to define the American ideationally, urging citizens to adopt the ideal attitudes they offered. Some of them employ definitions of the Iraqi “other” in their memoirs in order to justify and promote the foreign policy decisions of the time. Veteran memoirs, on the other hand, reflect how identities are formed, reformed, internalized, reinforced and/or refuted on the warfront. Focusing on the memoirs of Americans who served in Iraq, this article reveals that most of these memoirs harbor in them prejudiced, essentializing, and dehumanizing attitudes towards the Iraqi “other.” Such opinions and treatments address the civilian as well as the enemy; the individual insurgent as well as the al-Qaeda militant; the Middle Eastern as well as Muslims in general. My close reading of *Chasing Ghosts: Failure and Facades in Iraq, A Soldier's Perspective* (2006) by Paul Rieckhoff, will show how defining the “other” is crucial in the formation of individual and national identities on the warfront. This analysis suggests that Americans can eliminate their negative opinions of the Iraqi “other” only when they question the mythical American identity and engage in an individual process of identity formation.

### Öz

Yaşam yazını bir ulusun ulusal kimlik anlayışını gözlemlemek için ideal bir edebi türdür. Irak Savaşı (2003-2015) döneminde görev yapan Amerikalı politikacılar “Amerikalı”yı, ona atfettikleri ideal davranışları benimseme konusunda baskı altına alma ve onu düşünsel olarak tanımlama eğilimine sahiptir. Bazıları zamanın dış politikasını desteklemek ve meşrulaştırmak amacıyla yaşam anlatılarında Amerikan kimliğinin yanı sıra Iraklı “öteki” kimliğini de tanımlama çabasına girer. Cephe görev alan Amerikalıların anlatıları ise her iki kimliğin nasıl oluşturulduğu, nasıl yeniden biçimlendirildiği, içselleştirildiği, pekiştirildiği ve/veya çürütüldüğünü gösterir. Bu makale zamanın politikacı ve ordu mensuplarının Irak Savaşı anlatılarına odaklanarak, bu eserlerde Iraklı “öteki”ye yönelik önyargılı, genelleştirici, şahsiyetleştirici tutumları saptar. Eserlerdeki bu tutumlar göstermektedir ki, cephe görev yapmış yazarlar çoğu zaman Iraklı düşman ve siviller, direnişçi ve el-Kaide militanları, Orta Doğulu ve Müslümanlar arasındaki farkları göz ardı eder. Makalenin analiz kısmında, Paul Rieckhoff'un *Chasing Ghosts: Failure and Facades in Iraq, A Soldier's Perspective* (2006) adlı savaş anlatısı üzerinden, “öteki” tanımının bireysel ve ulusal kimlik algılarının oluşumundaki rolü irdelenir; bahsi geçen olumsuz kimlik algısının sebepleri Rieckhoff'un gözünden anlatılır. Bu bölüm adı geçen yazarların Iraklı “öteki” hakkındaki problemleri tutumlarından ancak mitik Amerikan kimliği algısını sorgulamak ve kendi bireysel kimliklerini oluşturmak yoluyla kurtulabileceklerini ortaya koyar.

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## Introduction

“Without the creation of abstract images of the enemy during training,” argues Richard Holmes, “battle would become impossible to sustain” (361). People define who they are in relation to those who they would and would not want to be. In order to fight for a noble cause and become a hero, one has to have an enemy who is not noble, but cowardly. Since the depiction of the self depends on the depiction of the “other,” negative identities are attributed to the “other” especially during times of war.

<sup>1</sup> The content of this article is taken from the author's unpublished dissertation entitled “Identities under Construction: Iraq War, Life Writing and American National Identity” (2015).

According to Holmes, these negative identities prompt hatred and “because virulent hatred [is] believed to stimulate pugnacity, which [is] the most effective antidote to fear and anxiety,” those who promote war often engage in unpleasant depictions of the “other,” who is not always the enemy (139).

Iraq War narratives of American politicians and military service members not only deal with depictions of the American, but also with the Iraqi “other.” During the Iraq War, George W. Bush and his administration promoted American national identity to gain support for their foreign policy, since they were aware of the fact that national identity is a determining factor for establishing unity. The politicians of the time either dedicated their memoirs to the war or included comments about it in a specific section. Iraq War veteran authors, on the other hand, have had a much more difficult experience than soldiers who have documented past wars. For them, identity construction through the narrating “I” is highly problematic because national identity enforces itself through multiple personal identities. What they discovered is that definitions of “American,” “un-American,” “patriot,” “traitor,” “enemy,” “ally,” “good guy,” and “bad guy” are not fixed or identifiable; they are in constant flux. The so-called “objective truth” announced by authorities had the potential to change, at any time, with a new declaration, and anyone could be reassigned to one of the categories above. Therefore, the narrators not only have to create identities for themselves, but also have to discard unwanted identities and convince readers that the identities they claim are accurate.

This article will examine depictions of the Iraqi “other” written by each of these groups of authors and emphasize the essentializing, prejudiced and sometimes hostile attitudes towards the Iraqi “other” they convey. My close reading of Paul Rieckhoff’s war memoir *Chasing Ghosts: Failure and Facades in Iraq, A Soldier’s Perspective* (2006), however, will present the possibility of adopting a more objective vision of American and Iraqi people, befitting the idea of “constructive” patriotism, by questioning the mythic American identity promoted by the politicians of the time.

### **Depictions of the Iraqi “Other” in the Memoirs of American Politicians**

In their memoirs, the politician-authors of the Iraq War often turned to definitions of the enemy to display who Americans are/not. The initial definitions provided by the members of the Bush Administration were deployed even after the end of his two terms. Authors from the Obama Administration, on the other hand, did not deal with defining Iraqi victims and enemies. Instead, they focused on

convincing readers that the mistakes made by the previous administration would not be repeated and that the strategies adopted by the administration were better and justifiable, while still being decisive and fearless. In short, the politician-authors from the Obama Administration deal heavily with defining the ideal American.<sup>2</sup>

Dick Cheney, the forty-sixth Vice President of the United States who served under George W. Bush from 2001 to 2009, defines Saddam Hussein as a “new kind of enemy” (330). He refers to terrorist groups as “bad guys” (335) and “evil people who dwell in shadows, planning unimaginable violence and destruction” (343). Donald Rumsfeld, the twenty-first Secretary of Defense from 2001 to 2006, calls Hussein “the Butcher of Baghdad” (429), who hid in a “spider hole” (530). He agrees with Bush’s 9/11 speech in which he says that the enemies “hate [Americans] freedoms—[their] freedom of religion, [their] freedom of speech, [their] freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other” (722). Condoleezza Rice, the sixty-sixth U.S. Secretary of State, adds to the list two more enemies: the “Syrian and Iranian regimes” (733). Paul Bremer, the U.S. Presidential Envoy to Iraq under George W. Bush, often associates Hussein with Adolf Hitler (39). The former held power almost three times longer (71) and built mass graves in Al-Hillah which resembled the “Einsatzgruppen during the Holocaust” (51). Clearly, these descriptions define the enemy as “evil,” and automatically lead one to the conclusion that those who fight that enemy will be “good.”

These politician-authors also define their enemy’s victims—Iraqi civilians—in another attempt to distance Americans from the “other.” Cheney depicts the Iraqi people’s appreciation of American efforts through an Iraqi man who thanks him (401). For Rumsfeld, Iraqis, like all Muslims, do not enjoy “democracy, civil liberties and laws made by men” (721-22). Bremer, on the other hand, thinks that Iraqis “can’t be secure without America’s help” (369), and the only Iraqi he quotes is a thankful one (395). As these examples demonstrate, Iraqi civilians are described as people desperately in need of American assistance.

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<sup>2</sup> The politician-authors from the Obama Administration are Leon Panetta, Hillary Clinton and Robert M. Gates. For information on their works, see the first chapter of “Identities under Construction” (2015).

### Depictions of the Iraqi “Other” in American Veteran Memoirs

According to media critic Frank Rich, Iraqis are “the better seen-than-heard dress extras” in the drama of the war, depicted by Americans as alternately “sobbing, snarling or cheering” (qtd. in Allan and Zelizer 24). Like the derogatory names given to the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War, during the Iraq War, Iraqis were called Ali Babas, cunts, camel jockeys, towelheads, ragheads, sandniggers and, the most widely-used of all, “hajjis.” The term “hajji” is so internalized that even those who reject the war cannot help but use it. Some soldiers deny that the term is an insult, while others confirm its derogatory nature. According to Craig T. Olson, the author of the Iraq War memoir *So This is War: A 3rd U.S. Cavalry Intelligence Officer's Memoirs of the Triumphs, Sorrows, Laughter, and Tears During a Year in Iraq* (2007), it is “this war generation’s term for any person of Arab descent,” essentializing all Middle Easterners (“The Joys of Kuwait”) or all Muslims in one word. In his Iraq War memoir, *The Sutras of Abu Ghraib: Notes from a Conscientious Objector* (2007), Aidan Delgado explains that originally, “hajji” is an honorific title for someone “who has gone on the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca that is one of the five pillars of Islam.” However, in U.S. army usage it means “gook,” “Charlie” or “nigger” (“Etemennigur”). When this term is used, an Iraqi man is dehumanized,

... no longer a man, a father, or a human being—he becomes for the aggressor a living embodiment of evil, and therefore all is allowed .... [W]e lose any sense of ourselves as flawed, limited human beings; we become avenging angels, righteous destroyers, and therein is the path to perdition. (“Father of the Banished”)

Unlike Delgado, who is able to realize the function of name-calling, in his 2010 memoir, *Every Other Four: The Journal of Cpl. Matthew D. Wojtecki*, Matthew D. Wojtecki, defends his team by claiming that those they kill were “not humans” but “savage uncivilized terrorists that deserved to die” (9). Moreover, for Wojtecki “[t]en or even twenty Iraqi [civilian] lives were not worth injuring or killing one Marine” (22). Carey H. Cash, the author of *A Table in the Presence: The Dramatic Account of How a U.S. Marine Battalion Experienced God’s Presence amidst the Chaos of the War in Iraq* (2004), goes further and compares Iraqi territory to the Old West. For Cash, Iraq is a place where there is “no sign of civilization,” an “empty wilderness” (“Fiery Furnace”).

Like Cash, Chris Kyle, the author of *The American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History* (2012), calls Iraq the “Injun Country” (“The Punishers”). Thus, Iraqis are “savages” and “uncivilized” Indians. Many authors liken Iraq to the Wild West and define Iraqis in similar terms.<sup>3</sup> Ryan Smithson, the author of *Ghosts of War: The True Story of a 19-Year-Old GI* (2009), on the other hand, portrays these enemies as evildoers (83), cowards (111), and infidels (100), who hate Americans and can be bullied easily (117).

Authors who are aware of the dehumanization of the Iraqi people try to explain the reasons behind the behavior of American soldiers. According to Kayla Williams,<sup>4</sup> the author of *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army* (2005), the words they used to refer to Iraqis “ensured that [they] didn’t see [their] enemy as people—as somebody’s father or son or brother or uncle,” so that they could easily be dehumanized and killed (200). She conveys that soldiers were angry with the local people because Iraqis were engaging in insurgency against American forces, while American forces were there to help (238). She defends American soldiers by claiming that they were not “bad people” but that they were only “beyond frustrated. Beyond angry. Beyond bitter” (254).

Some soldiers’ perceptions of the Iraqi people were shaped by the negative qualities attributed to them. Thomas A. Middleton’s 2009 memoir *Saber’s Edge: A Combat Medic in Ramadi, Iraq* is one such example. Middleton narrates how he was shocked to see that some Iraqis had the same blond hair and blue eyes as Americans. He found the experience “unsettling” since his enemy’s outward appearance was not any different than “his people’s” and consequently, he felt that he was “pointing a weapon at an ally” (“Taking the Fight to the Enemy”). Still, this does not prevent him from thinking that some Iraqi detainees seem like the “evil incarnate” (“Taking the Fight to the Enemy”).

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<sup>3</sup> See also Kopelman and Roth (2007), Jadick and Hayden (2007), Cash (2004), Mansoor (2004), Pantano (2011), Bellavia and Bruning (2007), Kyle et.al. (2012) and Wojtecki (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Among women authors of the Iraq War memoirs are Marine Officer Jane Blair, veteran journalist Kimberley Dozier, veteran journalist Anne Garrels, Judge Advocate General Vivian H. Gembara, soldier/prisoner of war Shoshona Johnson, U.S. Navy clinical psychologist Heidi S. Kraft, U.S. Airforce Colonel Kim Olson, Navy nurse Cheryl Ruff, Navy Chaplain Cheri Snively and a U.S. Marine, who served in the Marine Corps’ first Mortuary Affairs Unit, Jessica Goodell.

For Jason Christopher Hartley, the author of *Just Another Soldier: A Year on the Ground in Iraq* (2005), the emergence of “terrorist Joe,” a name he uses to refer to a typical terrorist, harkens back to *Bad Boys II*, a 2003 Hollywood movie directed by Michael Bay, made with “so much offensively unwatchable garbage,” “aggressively [sold] ... to the world” (68). For him, the movie presents America as “the big evil land of the infidels” (68). “Islamic Fundamentalist Joe looks at the proud and history-rich culture he comes from, and how the main character Martin Lawrence is encroaching on it,” and as a result, he becomes a terrorist (68). Hartley knows that he can only be “one-sided” in his attempts to explain the enmity between the American and the Iraqi, yet he continues in his quest to explain the war (230). He imagines a fictional story about the killing of an Iraqi boy, Raed, by American soldiers. In the story, the Iraqi character receives money from Al-Qaeda to place road-side bombs on the route used by American combat vehicles and in the process, is killed himself. This story of “poetic justice” is supposedly an attempt to be objective and think from the Iraqi point of view. However, it clearly fails in its mission, emerging, instead, as another offensive stereotype (230). The Iraqi, in Hartley’s imagination, would do anything for money; material gain becomes another reason why he fights against Americans.

Jack Coughlin’s 2005 book *Shooter: The Autobiography of the Top-Ranked Marine Sniper* deals with a different case. Coughlin, like many other soldiers, is aware of the enemy’s “dehumanization” process, which he thinks is necessary for survival. He narrates how close he sometimes comes to “humanizing” the enemy by “thinking of the enemy as individual human beings who might have families and dreams and identities of their own,” and that he has no option but to “dehumanize” them in order to stay alive as a sniper (“Touch of an Angel”). Coughlin’s words reveal that he is aware of the “identifying game” but chooses to go along with it for practical reasons (“Touch of an Angel”).

Some authors, however, manage to humanize the enemy to such an extent that they develop empathy with them and claim that they would also become insurgents if they were in the enemies’ shoes. James Harley’s 2005 memoir *The Trouble in Iraq: A Diary of a National Guardsman* reveals how Harley is able to understand the Iraqi people’s hopelessness, since he has “seen it million times before in [his] own countrymen—hopelessness because of unemployment, strung out on drugs, nothing to live for” (3). He treats Iraqis as individuals who are as worthy as his fellow citizens, and says that he can comprehend how “pissed” they

are as a result of the American invasion of their homeland (25), since he harbors the same feelings toward the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center (47). Like Harley, John Koopman, the author of *McCoy's Marines: Darkside to Baghdad* (2004), also claims that he would have been an insurgent if “foreign troops [drove] through” his country. He becomes “buddies” with Iraqis and finds them to be “kind and wonderful people” who naturally resent the American occupation (“On the March”).

A few authors criticize the prejudiced approach of American service members towards the Iraqi people. Tyler E. Boudreau is one of them. His memoir, *Packing Inferno: The Unmaking of a Marine* (2008), refutes the idea that “the perfect ‘Iraqi People’ would have had to love all [Americans] loved and reject all that [Americans] loathed including themselves” (“An American Dream”). For Boudreau, it is not surprising that Iraqis fight back: they have been called hajjis, “manhandled like animals,” “detained with bags over their heads, stuffed in kennel-like cages and sometimes abused like dogs.” Americans have “stole[n] their dignity” (“Law of War”). Brian Turner’s collection of autobiographical poems, *Phantom Noise* (2010), most visibly humanizes the Iraqi. In one of his poems, his girlfriend looks at the dead bodies of Iraqis and says “We should invite them into our home/We should learn their names, their history/We should know these people/we bury in the earth” (“Illumination Rounds”). In these lines, Turner calls attention to the Iraqi people’s humanity by equating them to friends visiting their home. He also highlights their individuality as well as their history, thereby rejecting attempts at dehumanization. In another poem, Turner, depicts the Iraqi in a positive light, and addresses the American soldier directly:

[H]ow can you pull the trigger seeing how they flinch at the bullet’s report how they rock and pray in the dirt/as you work your way down the row shooting men you may have smiled or waved at when you were just a boy sitting in the bed of your grandfather’s truck, men who climbed date palms and sang old love songs, saying *Ma tkuli ya hilu min wen Allah jibec* as they cut each sweet and sticky bunch of fruit (“Tell me, Beautiful One, Where Did the Lord Bring You?”)

As these examples demonstrate, American veterans’ view of the Iraqi people vary and not every author is aware of the dehumanizing attitude they have adopted. Out of the thirty-five works of life writing written between the years 2003-2015 by

American service members who served in Iraq and which deal with defining the Iraqi people, only ten works address the negative depictions and derogatory name-calling and instead define the Iraqi people in positive terms or try to deconstruct the essentialized Iraqi identity.<sup>55</sup> The scarcity of authors who engage with the identity attributed to the Iraqi “other” indicates that soldiers have internalized the negative usage of the term “hajji” and are prejudiced toward Iraqi people, most likely due to the political and military discourse of the war.<sup>6</sup> Often, the insults address the innocent civilian as well as the enemy combatant, the individual insurgent as well as the al-Qaeda militant, the Middle Eastern as well as the Muslim in general. This suggests that the line between the enemy and the people, who need to be “saved,” has already been blurred.

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<sup>5</sup> The thirty-five works of life writing written between the years 2003-2015 by American service members who served in Iraq are Michael Anthony's *Mass Casualties* (2009), Kevin and Monica Benderman's *Letters from Lewis Brig* (2007), Tyler E. Boudreau's *Packing Inferno* (2008), Colby Buzzell's *My War* (2006), Donovan Campbell's *Joker One* (2009), Carey H. Cash's *A Table in the Presence* (2004), Ryan A. Conklin's *An Angel from Hell* (2010), Jack Coughlin and Donald A. Davis's *Shooter* (2005), John Crawford's *The Last True Story I Will Ever Tell* (2005), Aidan Delgado's *The Sutras of Abu Ghraib* (2007), Micah Garren and Marie-Helene Carleton's *American Hostage* (2005), James Harley's *The Trouble in Iraq* (2005), Jason Christopher Hartley's *Just Another Soldier* (2005), Dave Hnida's *Paradise General* (2010), Richard Jadick and Thomas Hayden's *On Call in Hell* (2007), Alan R. King's *Twice Armed* (2006), John Koopman's *McCoy's Marines* (2004), Chris Kyle, Jim Defelice and Scott McEwen's *American Sniper* (2012), James E. Lewandowski's *Road Hunter in the Land between the Rivers* (2007), Matthew McAllister's *Blinded by the Sunlight* (2004), Thomas A. Middleton's *Saber's Edge* (2009), Craig T. Olson's *So This Is War* (2007), Illario Pantano's *Warlord* (2011), Paul Rieckhoff's *Chasing Ghosts* (2006), Rob Smith's *Closets, Combat and Coming Out* (2013), Brian Turner's *Phantom Noise* (2010), Kayla Williams's *Love My Rifle More Than You* (2005), Matthew D. Wojtecki's *Every Other Four* (2010), J. B. Hogan's *From Basic to Baghdad* (2005), Christopher Brownfield's *My Nuclear Family* (2010), Cheri Snively's *Heaven in the Midst of Hell* (2010), Jay Kopelman and Melinda Roth's *From Baghdad with Love* (2007), Ryan Smitson's *Ghosts of War* (2009), David Turnley's *Baghdad Blues* (2003) and Matt Gallagher's *Kaboom* (2011). For a list of the seventy-nine works written between the years 2003-2015, see Appendix 1 in “Identities under Construction” (2015). For information about the criteria for selection of works, see p.2. in the same source. The ten works that address the negative depictions and derogatory name-calling and define the Iraqi people in positive terms or try to deconstruct the essentialized Iraqi identity are those written by Boudreau (2008), Turner (2010), Smith (2013), Lewandowski (2007), (2010), Cash (2004), Koopman (2004), Rieckhoff (2006), Turnley (2003), Benderman and Benderman (2007) and Delgado (2007).

<sup>6</sup> There are other authors who are aware of the essentialized nature of the identities attributed to the Iraqi people. They either acknowledge it only (See Conklin, Olson, Hartley, King, Campbell, Buzzell, Harley), or comply with it in order to survive the war (See Coughlin, Williams).

### **Paul Rieckhoff's *Chasing Ghosts* and the Depiction of the Iraqi "Other"**

Paul Rieckhoff is an activist who founded the non-profit veterans' organization, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. He is also the author of the memoir *Chasing Ghosts: Failure and Facades in Iraq, A Soldier's Perspective* (2006). In his Iraq War memoir, he writes about his experience of leading an infantry platoon in Baghdad in the early days of the occupation. His narration makes his critical voice heard by "the generation of politicians" who "failed America's veterans—and the American people—in 2004," refusing to "hear [veterans] and treat[ing] [them] as outsiders" (307). Now that he is back from the war, his new mission is "fight[ing] for America back home" (309). His work is culturally and historically significant because it answers the question why American national identity declines in popularity and posits alternative views of the war. The narrative also deals with the negative-labeling of the Iraqi people and the enemy—the elements that complicate self-definitions of the veterans and the emerging self-definitions of the war itself. Thus, the memoir functions as a counternarrative of the war, offering alternative definitions of concepts such as "enemy," "hero," "terrorist," "American," "un-American," "patriot," "good guy" and "bad guy." Chuck Palahniuk has commented that "[n]o book since Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* has depicted this gruesome subject so compellingly" and that Rieckhoff "should make room on his mantel for the Pulitzer Prize" (Lappé n.p.).

In his memoir, Rieckhoff introduces himself as "part of a generation of soldiers who assumed war would be just like in the movies" and thinks this participation makes him view "everything cinematically" (4). He describes his generation as people who view combat as "a series of slow-motion scenes featuring brave men firing guns and screaming triumphantly, with 'Adagio for Strings' swirling around them" (4-5). Rieckhoff argues that watching American combat classics like *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Saving Private Ryan* and "[v]iolent and inspiring underdog stories" like *Glory*, *Gladiator*, and *Braveheart*, compels American soldiers to think that they too could be "heroes" (5). He joined the United States Armed Forces because he wanted to be "a hero," "a noble warrior," and "the ultimate American badass" (5). He wanted to "fight the good fight" like Jed Eckert in the movie *Red Dawn*, directed by John Milius (1984).

*Red Dawn* is central to the identity-making process in Rieckhoff's memoir. In the movie, Jed Eckert is the "ordinary, straight-talking American kid, until the morning the Soviets invade America and enemy paratroopers drop into his

Midwestern town” (5). The film’s tagline is “*The invading armies planned everything—except for eight kids called ‘The Wolverines.’*” The film depicts the struggle of Eckert (Patrick Swayze), his little brother Matt (Charlie Sheen) and “a ragtag bunch of high school kids in a daring escape to the mountains” to “courageously take on the evil army of occupiers” (5). They fight on horseback with unconventional tactics against the enemy who has a “superior military force and incredible odds” (5). Their rebellion inspires others; a nationwide insurgency breaks out; and Eckert and his guerilla team win the fight. During his first screening of the film, Rieckhoff even imagines doing what Eckert, his brother, friends and dog do if occupiers were to invade his hometown of Peekskill, and his street, Arden Drive (6). Interestingly, the film is in the Guinness Book of World Records for “having the most acts of violence of any film up to that time” and it was, for Rieckhoff, “the greatest thing [he had] ever seen” (5).

Apart from his desire to be like Jed Eckert, Rieckhoff chooses to serve in Iraq because he feels he would “never be able to look at [himself] in the mirror or be a good father to [his] future children,” if America went to war and he “didn’t do [his] part” (8). In addition, he wants to “test [his] mettle,” and thinks the Iraq War experience is suitable for this purpose, since war is “the oldest, and the ultimate, extreme sport” (8). He also mentions his “hunger for combat,” despite his “distrust for the president” and his lack of belief in the cause of the war (18). Rieckhoff does not think many people of his generation serve for patriotic reasons, and apparently neither does he as the graduate of a “liberal” college in the “well-heeled part of Western Massachusetts” (7). Although, his grandfather went to the Philippines; his father served in Vietnam; and he himself went to Iraq, his reason for going to war is far from fulfilling a family tradition. For him, the deal is simple: “If you were American and working-class, you served in the military” (13).

Even though he does not believe in the cause of the war and sees military service only as an opportunity to make money and test his mettle, Rieckhoff still yearns to become the heroic American Hollywood action star. Yet, he is not happy with the fact that during the war, the average American does not care about the American soldiers in Iraq. He thinks civilians did not care about the war “unless they had someone serving in it” (33). Employing statistics to show how few Americans “experienced” the Iraq War (1%), he claims that this situation makes empathy impossible among American soldiers and civilians. Rieckhoff believes that the lower enlistment rate during the Iraq War was caused by indifference. For him,

“New York doesn’t stop to think about anyone or anything,” which he both “love[s] and hate[s] about home” (33). By the end of his memoir, he notices that American lives were “uninterrupted” by the “threat of the draft,” and “increase in taxes,” or “sacrifice” of any sort, and that war meant “all benefits” and “no risks.” He cannot help but “hate them all,” calling their patriotism “patriotism lite” (266), despite the fact that his confessions in the beginning of the memoir demonstrate that the reason why he served the U.S. Armed Forces was not the result of patriotic concerns either.

Rieckhoff is also bothered by his diminishing human agency due to the lack of information soldiers had about the war. He feels he was unable to take meaningful action or exert control over his actions. He acknowledges that many American soldiers feel this way because they are “missing the key facts,” partly due to their low ranks (36). “Dwelling in misery,” soldiers try to fill in information gaps by using their imagination, which at some point turns them into “paranoids” (36). He quotes William S. Burroughs as a way to describe this paranoia. For Burroughs, a paranoid person is “someone who knows little of what’s going on” (qtd. in Rieckhoff 119). Rieckhoff’s paranoid attitude stems from the fact that information was purposefully kept from service members in order “to preserve the relation between the *superhero* (my emphasis) and his community as harmonious” (Stachyra 108). In this way, soldiers would accept, unquestioningly, the roles attributed to them and would be content with the idea of doing something good for the nation (109). Yet, knowing little about the war makes Rieckhoff feel so unsafe that he even imagines that the daily call to prayer in Arabic says:

Praise Allah! Allah is the most high! Praise Allah! Give thanks to the most high!” Or maybe it was: “Kill all the Americans! Kill that big fucker in Third Platoon who pissed me off last week and arrested Mr. Hassan down on Haifa Street! Blow him up, and all his friends! Send those infidel bastards back to their commercialized morally devoid wasteland! Do it tomorrow at six AAAAAMMMMM! (62)

As his imaginary translation reveals, Rieckhoff is seriously troubled by “the absence of information” and “compounded by the enormity of war” (36). He thinks this has “madden[ed]” him, causing him as well as all of his fellow soldiers to be “jumpy, edgy, and chomping at the bit” (36). For him, military personnel suffer from this problem whether they are “a four-star General” or a “Private First Class” (36). “The lower his rank, the more he dwells in mystery, and the more he struggles to connect the dots,” which Rieckhoff thinks is the reason behind the “nastiness and

hostility” of the war zone, which contributes to the “frustration level” of the soldier (36).

Rieckhoff’s personal responses to certain events clash with the assumed responses of military personnel. He is not only disillusioned by American politicians, but also about American soldiers and civilians. Eventually, he feels completely disappointed with and bitter about the war. He reports that apart from the frustration from which soldiers generally suffer, he has a hard time “compartmentalizing” his negative emotions “deep in the back of [his] mind” to prevent them from “bubbling up” and “exposing weakness” which could leave him “vulnerable” (259). He describes the general emotional condition of the American soldier as “angry” and even “pissed” due to the “heat, the shooting, the outdated flak jackets, the lack of information, the shitty chow, the IEDs (Improvised Explosive Device, aka roadside bombs), the sight of [their] wounded buddies, the lack of sex, the holidays missed, the boredom, the uncertainty, the complete and total lack of control over [their] own lives” (98). He adds that the “only group of people to take it out on” is the Iraqi people (98) and thus begins to depict his and his comrades’ perception of the Iraqi people.

For James Burke, “virulent hatred” serves as an “antidote to fear and anxiety” (139). In the case of the American soldiers on the Iraqi warfront, it is the “virulent hatred” felt for the Iraqi people that helps them overcome their fear and anxiety. Being harsh on American service members is easy, since their leaders call them “savages,” a word the British used to refer to Americans “when the Americans used guerilla tactics in the Revolutionary War” (Rieckhoff 102). However, Rieckhoff does not believe that Iraqis are inferior to Americans. On the contrary, he thinks that during the war, “the fate of Iraqi civilians and American soldiers [are] intimately intertwined” (155).

Rieckhoff provides an alternative definition for the Iraqi people in response to the abstract Iraqi image provided by politicians and the “demonised, feminised and dehumanised” image widely represented in the media (Khalid 27-28), which make fighting Iraqi people possible (Holmes 361). In his fourteenth chapter, Rieckhoff quotes Che Guevara’s definition of guerrilla warfare. His intention is to associate the definition below with the struggle of the Iraqi people:

It is important to emphasize that guerilla warfare is a war of the masses, a war of the people. The guerilla band is an armed nucleus, the fighting vanguard of the people. It draws its great force from the

masses of the people themselves. The guerilla band is not to be considered inferior to the army against which it fights simply because it is inferior in firepower. Guerilla warfare is used by the side which is supported by a majority but which possesses a much smaller number of arms for use in defense against oppression .... [T]he guerilla fighter is a social reformer, that he takes up arms responding to the angry protests of the people against oppressors, and that he fights in order to change the social system that keeps all his unarmed brothers in ignominy and misery. (165)

This definition describes perfectly the movie *Red Dawn*, upon which Rieckhoff initially grounds his ideal American soldier identity. Still, the roles, as he himself openly states, change during the war. Rieckhoff thinks the Iraq War “sounded too much like Vietnam War” as it “had all the same flaws at its foundation: an unclear foundation, a guerilla enemy that was virtually distinguishable from civilians, a culture [that American forces] didn’t understand at all, and tenuous public support” (14). His definition of the war suggests that he almost finds Iraqi resistance heroic. He calls *Americans* “Ali Baba,” a derogatory name usually reserved for Iraqis (214). In this context, Jed Eckert’s story is an allegory of the Iraq War, yet one that is turned upside down for the Americans. The positive Iraqi identity offered in the memoir is radical in how it reconstructs the American national identity. In other words, the national identity offered in Rieckhoff’s text is the opposite of those found in works that promote an ideal/mythic American identity as espoused by American politicians and Hollywood movies. Likewise, the identity he attributes to the Iraqi people also contradicts the Iraqi identity they themselves promote. When Rieckhoff goes to Iraq, he sees that the role he had previously tailored for himself—fighting against occupying forces—is not a realistic one. He begins to see American forces as the occupiers and the Iraqi guerilla forces as “Jed Eckerts” who try to protect their country. “Now, with the roles reversed,” he says, he was on his way “to invade and occupy someone else’s country” (6). He is afraid that America could “soon create thousands of Iraqi Jed Eckerts in places like Mosul and Baghdad” (6).

Another mythic identity usually attributed to American service members in Iraq is the one stemming from George W. Bush’s ideology of “compassionate conservatism,” or the idea of “winning hearts and minds.” According to this line of thinking, American soldiers should do whatever is necessary to fulfill American foreign policy goals while treating civilians compassionately. For Rieckhoff, the two

opposing forces—toughness and compassion—can never coexist in real life, since “the best-trained soldiers are not designed to be humanitarians” (97). In addition, he thinks that the United States Army has been trying to make its soldiers “more deadly” and thus “more effective” especially since World War II (198). As his words reveal, Rieckhoff thinks, American soldiers are just “trained to succeed on the battlefield with incredible proficiency” and are not “designed to be buffers” (97), thereby rendering compassion an absurd and contradictory expectation.

Moreover, for Rieckhoff, Americans are arrogant and naïve, if not hypocritical, to assume that the problem between Iraqi Sunni and Shia will be solved quickly. Underscoring the fact that slavery formally ended in America in 1865 but the problem of racism is still a matter of discussion today (108), Rieckhoff conveys that Americans are “sheltered and deluded” not to see what lies behind “incidents like [the] Rodney King beating and Hurricane Katrina fallout” (109). For him, even though American soldiers in Iraq are “volunteers” (6), recruiters in America “work like used-car salesman,” giving no respect or heroic value to the American soldier (7).

Throughout the text, Rieckhoff composes his own definition for the collectively accepted mythical identities attributed to Americans and challenges the negative identities attributed to the Iraqi people. Earlier in the work, his narrated “I,” in V.M. Ames’ words, deals with other people’s perception of his behaviors. It does “less unexpected things in society” and sticks with “joint actions” during the war (Ames 51- 52). Yet, because of his nonconformist narrating “I,” who expresses his thoughts against the war in retrospect, Rieckhoff is able to engage in a reinvention of his, American soldiers’ and the Iraqi people’s identity. For him, Americans are arrogant and naïve and thus fail to see the reality of the war itself, the true condition of American soldiers and the strife of the Iraqi people. Unable to be both tough and compassionate at the same time, the Americans he describes become the invaders. Consequently, Iraqis are rendered heroes who defend their country.

### **Conclusion**

The politician-authors of Iraq War memoirs often turn to definitions of Iraqi civilians as enemies to emphasize American superiority. In addition, the negative depictions of the “other” they provide were used to justify the foreign policy decisions they made and implemented. Despite the fact that veteran memoirs show varying attitudes towards the Iraqi “other,” essentializing, prejudiced and even

hostile representations of the Iraqi “other” are apparent in works of life writing written between the years 2003 and 2015. Out of the thirty-five works written during this period by American service members who served in Iraq, and which deal with defining the Iraqi people, only ten address the negative depictions and derogatory name-calling and define the Iraqi people in positive terms or deconstruct an essentialized Iraqi identity. This suggests that soldiers have internalized negative and prejudiced attitudes towards Iraqis, probably due to the political and military discourse of the war. The depictions of the Iraqi “other” in Iraq War memoirs written by American service members reveal that more often than not, the insults target the innocent civilian as well as the enemy combatant, the individual insurgent as well as the al-Qaeda militant, the Middle Eastern as well as the Muslim in general. This suggests that the line between the enemy and the people, who need to be “saved,” has already been blurred.

While patriotism is often associated with the love of one’s country and civic engagement, nationalism today connotes xenophobia, anti-immigrant attitudes, mythical definitions of America and national arrogance, which brings with it a foreign policy that is based on the belief that the United States has a right to interfere with other countries’ internal affairs. Michael Billig calls such nationalism “banal” and thinks that it is “hardly innocent” as it is “reproducing institutions which possess vast armaments [that] can be mobilized without lengthy campaigns of political preparation” (7). When banal nationalism is adopted, the nation is recreated daily for its citizens according to the needs of politicians. Eventually, nationalism becomes an “endemic condition” (Billig 6).

Paul Rieckhoff chooses to disown banal nationalism by breaking from the ideal American identity promoted by American politicians, military officials and Hollywood movies. His narrative provides an alternative point of view and contributes to what John R. Gillis would call the “democratization of the past” (71). Through the textual identities it creates, *Chasing Ghosts*, as Holland et al. would claim, suggests “new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being” (3). Rieckhoff’s patriotism is a “constructive” one, which can be defined as an “attachment to country characterized by critical loyalty,” and “questioning and criticism” driven by “a desire for positive change” (Schatz, et al. 153). Rieckhoff’s memoir exemplifies an American veterans’ changing perceptions of his individual identity, national identity and the identity he attributes to the Iraqi “other” in the course of the Iraq War. As such, it is a culturally important work of literature that displays how negative

attitudes toward the Iraqi “other” are formed and internalized. More importantly, it reveals that Americans can purge their negative opinions of the Iraqi “other” only when they question the mythical American identity and engage in an individual process of identity formation.

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