

# Us vs. Them: Cultural Encounters in Warzones through Reading American War Literature

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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Samuel Huntington argued that the end of the Cold War Era marked the end of global instability based on ideological and economic differences and preferences. However, he did not predict any kind of a peaceful future for humankind but maintained that future conflicts will arise from cultural differences. The clashes are inevitable, he claims, as long as one side (usually the West) insists on imposing universalism to other civilizations whose cultural awareness is on the rise. Ever since the Vietnam War, American military tacticians have believed that the knowledge and understanding of the enemy's culture will lead to victory, and American military academies and schools are dedicating more attention to cultural studies within their general strategy. This paper is based on the reading and analysis of several American fiction and non-fiction novels from the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars. Since all of these works are first-hand accounts of war experience and soldiers' cultural encounters with their 'adversaries', the research is focused on the (im)possibility of soldiers' true understanding and appreciation of different cultures/civilizations during wartime. It also suggests that knowing the enemy is to no avail if wars are fought with the goal of Westernizing other cultures.

**Keywords:** Culture; West; United States of America; war; American literature

## **Mi proti njim: Kulturna srečevanja na vojnih območjih skozi branje ameriške vojne književnosti**

POVZETEK

Leta 1996 je Samuel Huntington predstavil tezo, da konec hladne vojne pomeni tudi konec globalne nestabilnosti, ki temelji na ideoloških in ekonomskih razlikah oziroma preferencah. Hkrati je napovedal, da prihodnost človeštva kljub temu ne bo mirna, pač pa da bodo prihodnji konflikti izhajali iz kulturnih razlik. Zapisal je, da so spopadi neizogibni, dokler ena od strani (običajno Zahod) vztraja na vsiljevanju univerzalizma civilizacijam, katerih kulturna zavest se krepi. Vse od vietnamske vojne so ameriški vojaški taktiki prepričani, da poznavanje in razumevanje sovražnikove kulture vodi k zmagi, zato ameriške vojaške akademije in šole v svojih strategijah vse bolj poudarjajo kulturne študije. Pričujoči prispevek temelji na branju in analizi več ameriških leposlovnih in neleposlovnih romanov o vietnamski in iraški vojni. Ker vsi predstavljajo neposredne izkušnje in kulturna srečevanja vojakov z njihovimi »nasprotniki«, se raziskava osredinja na njihovo (ne)zmožnost resničnega razumevanja in spoštovanja različnih kultur oziroma civilizacij v času vojne. Prispevek pokaže tudi, da je poznavanje sovražnika zaman, če je cilj vojne preoblikovanje drugih kultur po zahodnem zgledu.

**Ključne besede:** kultura; Zahod; Združene države Amerike; vojna; ameriška književnost

# Us vs. Them: Cultural Encounters in Warzones through Reading American War Literature

## 1 Introduction: War and Culture

*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* is a seminal work by Samuel Huntington. As early as in 1993, he realized that the fall of the Iron Curtain would not lead to global peace. A new world had emerged, not one of peace and stability, but one in which global politics (and conflicts) were “reconfigured along cultural lines” (1996, 19) instead of ideological:

In the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among people are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural [...] People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and, at the broadest level, civilizations [...] The most important groupings of states are no longer the three blocks of the Cold War but rather the world's seven or eight major civilizations [...] In this new world, local politics is the politics of ethnicity; global politics is the politics of civilizations. The rivalry of the superpowers is replaced by the clash of civilizations. (Huntington 1996, 21)

Despite the numerous definitions of culture and civilization that can be found in scholarly studies (see Braudel 1982, 177–81; 1995, 4–5; Wallerstein 1991, 215; Melko 1969, 8–9 to name just a few), Huntington (1996, 43) offers his straightforward version: “A civilization is the broadest cultural entity [...] [or] the highest cultural grouping of people and at the broadest level of cultural identity people have [...] Civilizations are the biggest ‘we’ within which we feel culturally at home from all the other ‘thems’ out there.” He also adds that religion is usually the most distinctive element between civilizations and thus divides them into the following: Western, Orthodox, Islamic, Hindu, Sinic, Buddhist, Latin American, African, and Japanese.

As much as it was praised, Huntington's book was also subjected to fierce criticism (see Russett, Oneal, and Cox 2000; Fox 2005). Said (2001, n.p.) being one of the most vocal opponents of Huntington's theory, claimed that it offered too simple a view of the world's affairs by disregarding “the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization,” and Chomsky (2001) saw it as a study that seemed to suggest pointers for the West to exploit other civilisations more successfully. However, even though Huntington realised that this “civilizational approach” (1996, 36) to world affairs will not be valid forever, he claimed that it offers a valuable insight into forces shaping the world at the turn of the millennium. According to him, the book is intended to be “meaningful to scholars and policy makers” (1996, 13), not as a means of promoting future conflicts but rather as a means to greater understanding and appreciation of civilisational differences.

Problems and conflicts between different civilisations emerge from the fact that one side believes that it is or should be superior to all others. That kind of reasoning proves that civilisations “comprehend without being comprehended by others” (Toynbee, quoted in Huntington 1996, 42), and seem to observe the world only through their own prism. Furthermore, John Keegan argues that “war embraces much more than politics [...] [I]t is always an expression of culture, often a determinant of cultural forms, in some societies the culture itself” (quoted in Karsten 1999, 197), suggesting that war and culture/civilisation mutually influence and shape each other.

Interestingly, Major B. C. Lindberg from the United States Marines Corps wrote a study *Culture... A Neglected Aspect of War* (1996) in which he maintains that culture is “a significant factor of war” because “cultural differences are [...] serving as the main impetus of war.” The purpose of his study is “to explore cultural conflict – its causes and effects” in order to “educate Marines on the relationship between culture and war.” As a military professional, he understands that culture is a significant factor of war and as such must not be overseen or disregarded, because the failure to understand different cultures often leads to failure in the battlefield. As an illustration of that idea Lindberg explains that Americans were successful at waging the so-called “total wars” (World Wars) but that “limited wars” (those fought in a limited space and time, like the Vietnam War or operation in Somalia) “provided painful lessons of a failed strategy, leaving the credibility of the United States in question.”

In the light of these ideas, the paper will deal with war narratives that have emerged from two limited wars Americans fought – the Vietnam War and the Iraq War: Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* (1977), Tim O’Brien’s *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), *Going after Cacciato* (1978), and *The Things They Carried* (1990), Kayla Williams’ *Love My Rifle More Than You* (2005) and Colby Buzzell’s *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005).<sup>1</sup> Since all the selected novels extensively and explicitly deal with the problems and issues that arise when two cultural groups ‘cross swords’, the focus of the analysis will be on the aspect of culture and cultural encounters in order to see how and why American soldiers failed to understand the culture of their enemies; that is, to explicate how their own cultural heritage disabled them from understanding the Other. The analysis of war novels will try to provide an answer to the question if the understanding and appreciation of another culture is even possible and/or necessary in conflict situations.

## 2 American Way of War

In the article “American Way of War,” Chambers (1999, 777) claims that “military institutions and war reflect the part of the society that creates them.” Therefore, we must be familiar with the American history, culture, and the American perception of the war if we wish to provide an in-depth analysis of war narratives and the aspect of cultural encounters during war.

In the chapter “The Rise of the West,” Huntington (1996, 51) explains how the West started ruling the world in the 16th century, when it became technologically and militarily dominant to others and started colonising. As much as the Americans wish to separate themselves from their European cultural origins, in essence they have repeated the same thing; they used force and technological superiority to achieve different goals they had throughout history. Even though Americans claim that they are a peace-loving nation, and view war as an aberration, “war has been a regular part of American history, integral to the way the nation developed” (Chambers 1999, 777). In his book *American Myth, American Reality*, Robertson explains that the unique vision of war in American consciousness stems directly from their experience:

Americans still tell tales of and believe in the unity, the great purposes, and the ultimate destiny of the American nation. Very often they are tales of organized, mass action; tales of war which embody nationalism and the vision of freedom. American wars are revolutions, the Civil War on a world scale. The end and the purpose of those wars is freedom, the destruction of slavery (whatever its form), and the construction of individual and national independence.

<sup>1</sup> Except for the fictional novels *Going after Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*, all other novels examined here are non-fiction, or to be precise, authors’ memoirs based on their training and combat experiences.

Wars, in American Myth, are the expression of the belief that Americans can do anything they desire, can build nations and rebuild societies, can speed progress, bring freedom and democracy to the world, so long as they are united, organized, and willing to devote all their human and material resources to the end desired. America, the imperial America, is “one giant step for mankind.” (Robertson 1982, 349)

The idea of the ‘destiny’ of the American nation takes us back to 1630, to the time when John Winthrop held a sermon aboard *Arabella*, during the dangerous and difficult journey to the new land. He asked of his people to build a new form of community there, one that would serve as a model to all Christianity: “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us” ([1630] 1974, 25). If we examine the Bible, we notice that Winthrop’s words are a direct reference to the Gospel according to Matthew (New Revised Standard Version):

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basked, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Mt 5:14–16)

Therefore, it was their ‘destiny’ and an obligation toward God, who had blessed their quest and journey, to be the chosen people who would found a model community to serve as an example to the rest of the world. Robertson claims that Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity” marks the beginning of American mythology, and the idea of them being the God chosen people with a special mission in the world prevails to this day:

Most Americans agree that the United States is among the most powerful nations on earth. They would also agree that that power ought to be ‘good for something’. They believe America has a mission and that its destiny is not simply to be rich and powerful and big, but to be for some God-given purpose. Few believe that America arrived at its present state of wealth and power by accident [...] [M]ost Americans believe America can do something about the state of the world: America has a responsibility [...] The vision of Crusader, of Fortress, of Champion, of the freedom and democracy and happiness (the unique qualities) of the New World, is still the controlling vision, still the primary explanation Americans can find – the logic they find most reasonable – for their sense of mission and destiny. (Robertson 1982, 25–27)

This quotation also explains that the American Myth, together with the American mission and destiny in the world, is closely connected to war efforts, and American wars are indeed the ‘good wars’ in their collective consciousness and memory. With the Revolutionary War (1775–1783) the colonists rejected the British colonial system and created a free and independent nation. The Mexican War (1846–1848) is a result of the belief (Manifest Destiny) that the growing nation should stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific shore even if that meant robbing Mexicans of their territories. The American Civil War (1861–1865) resulted in the abolishment of slavery and the victory of industry over agriculture. Simultaneously with all these wars, Americans fought the Native Americans, taking over their territory as well. The beginning of the 20th century marked the end of wars fought on American soil and the beginning of a wider international intervention. In World War I Americans gained international respect, and by the end of World War II the United States established itself as

a world superpower. The pattern is more than evident; for Americans war is, although undesirable, justified because it defends “American lives, property, and ideals” (Chambers 1999, 777). What is more, war is the fuel that secures one of the imperatives of the American spirit – progress.

Their World War II triumph marked a shift in the American perception of war. As Robertson asserts, “[t]he myth of war, with all its analogies, its aggressive and heroic metaphors, [...] and its implications of national unity, national prosperity, and national success, has become the most important model of American behavior since World War II” (1982, 335). This belief has led them to the denial of cultural differences and their importance in warfare. As Lindberg precisely notes, the idea that all men are created equal and that they all have the same inalienable rights “establishes the primacy of an individual’s rights in politics and law [...] [Therefore,] Americans readily and incorrectly assume their values are *universal*, and that other countries should embrace and share these same views” (1996, 9). In a nutshell, the post-World War II confidence about the supremacy of their political and military system, as well as their way of life being the only right, made Americans insensitive about other cultures and civilisations. Since history taught them that they could win any war just as long as they were unified and dedicated to it, they started to neglect other cultures and their history and customs, which proved disastrous in Vietnam and Iraq.

### 3 Limited Wars – Vietnam and Iraq

The post-World War II period in the United States was one of stability, indulgence, and prosperity. Unlike Europe, the United States remained territorially intact, which enabled it to confirm its position as a world power. Soon, the Cold War began, providing Americans with a new enemy: Communism, an ideology they believed threatened their liberties and their way of life. The so-called ‘red scare’ was the cause of wars in Korea and Vietnam because “the United States saw Vietnam as crucial in its Cold War strategy of ‘containing’ the Communists, fearing that if South Vietnam fell, the rest of Southeast Asia would quickly follow suit in accordance with the controversial Domino Theory” (Carpenter 2001, 348).

The Vietnam War (1960–1972) was the first modern war Americans lost, and that to an economically and technologically inferior enemy. This war divided American society, threatened their economy, and more importantly, called into question their world influence, responsibility, and mission in the world. Americans simply could not make sense of how and why they lost the war in Vietnam; their logic of war failed them in South East Asia, even though they were superior in almost every aspect:

American soldiers went to action in Vietnam with the gigantic weight of American industry behind them. Never before in history was so much strength amassed in such a small corner of the globe against an opponent apparently so inconsequential. If Ho Chi Minh described this war with the French as a struggle between “grasshoppers and elephants,” he was now a microbe facing a leviathan. (Karnow 1983, 435)

In the American logic of war, it seemed impossible for them to lose. Lindberg claims that “the events in the Vietnam War exemplify failure at the highest level to appreciate culture as an aspect of war” (1996, 9), suggesting that the lack of knowledge and understanding of the opponent’s culture resulted in a bad strategy for that war, and ultimately led to loss. As Olson and Roberts further explain, “[American policymakers] have no knowledge of their enemy. They have not read the works of Mao Zedong, Karl Marx, or Vladimir Lenin. Instead they believe that American dollars will lead to victory” (1996, 75).



Today, many scholars find similarities between the war in Vietnam and that in Iraq (see Ricks 2007; Ballard 2010; Keegan 2005). Once again, the American policymakers failed to provide a clear cause and strategy for the war, and once again, the American society stood up against the war. Even though many political and military leaders rejected any comparison between Vietnam and Iraq, the general comment in John R. Ballard's book *From Storm to Freedom: America's Long War with Iraq*, detects the same problem America faced forty years ago in Vietnam: "[t]he coalition's inability to understanding the culture and society within the battlespace led to important errors" (2010, 144).

The study and analysis of American war literature succinctly offers the causes, reasons, and explanations of cultural mayhem that happened during the Vietnam and the Iraq War. All of the chosen novels depict their characters before, during, and after the war. The authors give a valuable insight into the myths the characters were born with, and how those myths eroded during the war. In that manner, they also indirectly explain that the superficial understanding of both their own and enemy's culture fuelled frustration, anger, and violence during their deployment.

### 3.1 American Cultural Heritage

The first instance to examine is the authors' cultural heritage, that is, how their upbringing and the love for their country encouraged them to join the military.

For example, in his memoir *A Rumor of War*, Caputo claims that he was "seduced into uniform" by the "age of Kennedy's Camelot" (1996, xiv), suggesting that the post-World War II period shaped American vision and culture as victorious, right, just, and dominant. Kennedy, who in Caputo's mind revived the Puritan belief of them being a city upon a hill, is responsible for the naïve idealism and "the implicit conviction that the Viet Cong would be quickly beaten and that we are doing something altogether noble and good" (1996, xiv). Caputo continues (1996, 353–54): "[O]ur self-image as progressive, virtuous, and triumphant people exempt from the burdens and tragedies of history came apart in Vietnam, and we had no way to integrate the war or its consequences into our collective and individual consciousness." Scholar John Hellman speaks directly to this point in his study of Vietnam War literature, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*:

Vietnam is an experience that has severely called into question American myth. Americans entered Vietnam with certain expectations that a story, a distinctly American story, would unfold. When the story of America in Vietnam turned into something unexpected, the true nature of the larger story of America itself became subject of intense cultural dispute. On the deepest level, the legacy of Vietnam is the disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and our vision of the future. (Hellman 1986, x)

Similarly, in his first novel about the Vietnam War, the memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, O'Brien mentions that he was born out of the World War II triumph: "I grew out of one war into another [...] I was bred with the haste and dispatch and careless muscle-flexing of a nation giving bridle to its own good fortune and success. I was fed by the spoils of 1945 victory" (1999b, 11). Another Vietnam War veteran, Ron Kovic, depicts his upbringing in the memoir *Born on the Fourth of July*. As an all-American boy, a good and humble Christian, an excellent athlete, and a patriot, Kovic pledges that he will join the Marine Corps as soon as he graduates from high school because he feels it is his obligation toward the country that has been so generous to him. Unlike Kovic, O'Brien in his later novel, *The Things They Carried*, tries to fight the sense of obligation because he does not believe that the war in Vietnam is right and just. However, his attempt to desert quickly fails due to the centripetal force of the American myth:

Intellect had come up against emotion. My conscience told me to run, but some irrational and powerful force was resisting, like a weight pushing me toward the war [...] I saw my parents calling to me from the far shoreline. I saw my brother and sister, all the townsfolk, the mayor and the entire Chamber of Commerce and all of my old town teachers and girlfriends and high school buddies [...] and Abraham Lincoln, and Saint George, and [...] several members of the United States Senate, and LBJ, and Hick Finn, and all the dead soldiers back from the grave [...] I did try. It just wasn't possible. All those eyes on me – the town, the whole universe – and I couldn't risk the embarrassment [...] I would go to war – I would kill and maybe die – because I was embarrassed not to. (O'Brien 1998, 49–57)

American cultural heritage, the American myth, proved to be an integral part of both the proponents (like Kovic and Caputo) and opponents (like O'Brien) of the war, creating in them the feeling of either obligation or embarrassment and thus landing them in the Vietnam War.

On the other hand, the Iraq War novels illustrate that this generation of soldiers is much more reluctant to ingest the politically created mythic image of the war. Their reasons for joining the military are quite 'secular'; Williams signed up to make some personal changes in her life, such as to gain financial security, a chance to see the world, and to better her "career prospects" (Williams and Staub 2005, 41). As for Buzzell, he admits that he did not join the Army because he had been traumatized over 9/11 but because he believed that the Army might be a "quick-fix solution to his problems" and because "it was not just another job, it was an adventure" (2007, 20).

### 3.2 Clueless in Vietnam and Iraq

American cultural heritage and experience shaped a unique, specific, and profound way of reasoning about themselves and the world, thus impairing them from observing, acknowledging, and comprehending their enemy's cultural heritage. For example, in *A Rumor* we read that the only thing the American soldiers know is that they are the soldiers of the greatest country in the world. As for their knowledge of the other side, Caputo notes, "we hardly knew where Vietnam was" (1996, 8). Furthermore, Caputo explains how unfamiliar they were with the guerilla tactics (since they had only studied Clausewitz and Napoleon during their officers' training) but still confident in their easy victory: "Asian guerillas did not stand the chance against U.S. Marines [...] There was nothing we could not do because we were Americans, and for the same reason, whatever we did was right" (1996, 69–70).

For Kovic, the American myth painted the world black and white until the Vietnam War smeared the colours in a confusing shade of grey, specifically, when his platoon accidentally killed innocent Vietnamese civilians: "He never figured it would ever happen this way. It never did in the movies. There were always the good guys and the bad guys, the cowboys and the Indians. There was the enemy and the good guys and each of them killed the other" (2005, 191). Having been raised on John Wayne movies, Kovic is unable to see conflict any other way.

In *Going after Cacciato*, O'Brien dedicates an entire chapter to listing the things American soldiers did not know about Vietnam:

Not knowing the language, they did not know the people. They did not know what the people loved, or respected or feared or hated [...] They did not know false smiles from true smiles, or if in Quang Ngai a smile had the same meaning it had in the States. "Maybe the dinks got things mixed up," Eddie once said, after the time a friendly looking farmer bowed and smiled



and pointed them into a minefield. “Know what I mean? Maybe... well, maybe the gooks cry when they’re happy and smile when they’re sad. Who the hell knows? Maybe when you smile over here it means you’re ready to cut the other guy’s throat. I mean, hey, this here is a different culture.” (O’Brien 1999a, 261–62)

Reading *Love My Rifle* and *Killing Time*, one notices that some efforts were made in order to make this new generation of soldiers more knowledgeable about the country and the culture they were soon to be fighting. However, the manner in which they were taught about another culture seems to be just an illusion and offers soldiers a false sense of knowledge about the Arab culture:

22 Oct 2003

Today we got the Iraqi customs and language brief. I fell asleep during the first half hour of the brief, but when I woke up, the soft-spoken civilian guy who was giving it, who looked to be of Middle Eastern descent, told us a bunch of stuff about it being impolite to show the locals the bottom of your boots, and then we all got a quick crash course in Arabic. He would say something in Arabic, and we’d all repeat it. Like do they really expect us to memorize anything that was taught to us today? We’re going to Iraq for at least a year, and we all get a one-hour course in Arabic, and they expect us to be able to speak a little of it after this brief? (Buzzell 2007, 64–65)

Buzzell also offers a transcript of the “Civilian Rules of Interaction” that were issued to American soldiers before deployment and that explained how to behave in order not to offend or humiliate the Iraqis. However, upon examining the cursory list, one gets the impression that the rules have been put together just for the sake of having them on paper and not really to be implemented and exercised. What is more, all these rules again examine the foreign culture from the American point of view and bluntly imply that American culture is superior to Iraqi:

Be firm, but be courteous. You can afford it – you have the gun [...] Their culture *is not* your culture; their customs *are not* your customs. They do not care about ours – we need a working knowledge of theirs [...] Nothing in these rules of interaction limits your obligation to take all necessary and appropriate action to defend yourself and your unit. (Buzzell 2007, 63)

Once Buzzell arrives in Iraq, he witnesses all the might and glory of American industry and its sole purpose of making American soldiers as comfortable as possible. At the Forward Operating Base Marez American soldiers have “phone centers, internet cafes, cow halls, hajji shops, PX stores, fruit-juice stands, tailor shops, public shitters, the MWR (morale, welfare, recreation) centres, and public transportation” (2007, 147–53) at their disposal. Still, soldiers tend to complain because there are not enough electrical outlets in their vehicles: “You figure there’s like 10 guys in the vehicle, that’s at least 10 things that need to be recharged, like portable DVD players, Gameboys, electric razors, MP3 players, Discmans, digital cameras, electric toothbrushes, laptop batteries, crap like that” (2007, 207). In his book *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, Ricks testifies to Buzzell’s claims saying that the American military was more concerned about their own wellbeing than about helping the Iraqis, who at the time did not even have electricity or water (Ricks 2007, 200).

The situation was a bit different for Kayla Williams, since she was not as uninformed about the culture as the rest of her comrades. She had dated a Lebanese for some time and during that period learned some Arabic, a bit about the Muslim religion, and was able to detect and compare major differences between the cultures. Therefore, when Kayla joined the military as a linguist and was deployed to Iraq, she admitted that her previous connection with the Arab men and

Arabic culture had given her “more sympathy, understanding, and respect for the people in Iraq” (Williams and Staub 2005, 109). At first, Kayla is caught between two worlds/cultures. She has a working knowledge of the Arab culture, but at the same time, she justifies the actions of her fellow soldiers who do not share her knowledge about the Iraqi culture and customs. For example, she knows how difficult and frightening it might be for an eighteen-year-old American soldier with a loaded weapon when an Iraqi approaches him yelling something the soldier does not understand:

In the Middle East, people have different communication style than Americans do. Americans have this three-foot-space rule. We do not want anyone to invade a space within three feet of us when we talk. For most Americans this is standard. In the Middle East the space is much less – it’s more like a foot or six inches. They get right up in your face. And they will yell. It looks to most Americans like aggression. But it isn’t. It’s friendly. (Williams and Staub 2005, 109)

Despite her willingness to understand obstacles that arise when trying to live, communicate, and work (fight) in another culture, Kayla is at certain moments shocked by how far the ignorance of her fellow soldiers goes. To illustrate, Kayla is attached to a platoon of infantrymen who are conducting searches for weapons and prospective insurgents. Once, they arrive at a monastery and question the monk about any weapons he might possess with the goal of confiscating it. Kayla is the interpreter between the lieutenant and the monk, and even though the monk speaks good English and understands everything the lieutenant is saying, the lieutenant keeps turning to Kayla for translation. “Is it possible the lieutenant cannot understand the monk – simply because he *looks* different?” (Williams and Staub 2005, 115), Kayla asks herself, suggesting that for some it takes more than speaking the language to bridge the gap between cultures. Kayla quickly learns that all the pre-knowledge about the Muslim culture is indeed just a mirage because once American soldiers find themselves in Iraq, they show no “respect for the customs of the people, for the rhythms of their lives, or for the shit they’ve had to suffer. There was way too little attempt to communicate with the people. Too many soldiers acting like it was *shoot-em-up* time” (2005, 142).

### 3.3 Frustration

The confusion about the foreign culture quickly transgressed into frustration and anger simply because the soldiers were puzzled by the reactions of the locals to American violence. Caputo testifies how during a hamlet search, a woman paid no attention to her house being ransacked by American soldiers, once again demonstrating that he is able only to analyse events from the American perspective:

The girl just sat there and stared and nursed the baby. The absolute indifference in her eyes began to irritate me. Was she going to sit there like a statue while we turned her house upside down? I expected her to show anger or terror. I wanted her to, because her passivity seemed to be a denial of our existence, as if we were nothing more to her than a passing wind that had temporarily knocked a few things out of place. I smiled stupidly and made a great show of tidying up the mess before we left. See, lady, we’re not like the French. We’re all-American good-guy GI Joes. You should learn to like us. We’re Yanks, and Yanks like to be liked. We’ll tear this place apart if we have to, but we’ll put it back in its place. See, that’s what I’m doing now. But if she appreciated my chivalry, she did not show that either. (Caputo 1996, 89)

Caputo mentions that he at first pitied the Vietnamese for the terrible things they were enduring, but also that their indifference is something he can never understand. It is obvious that he expected the same reaction he would get in the U.S.:

[...] their ability to control emotions was just as inhuman [...] They did not behave as I expected them to behave; that is, the way Americans would under the same circumstances. Americans would have done something: shaken their fists, wept, run away, demanded compensation. These villagers did nothing, and I despised them for it. (Caputo 1996, 133–34)

Even though Caputo understands that the Vietnamese behave in such a manner because of their history of perpetual invasion, occupations, wars, violence, ransacked houses, and burnt down hamlets, he does not appreciate their inertia and believes that they deserve all that is happening to them: “Why feel compassion for the people who feel nothing for themselves?” (1996, 134)

In *The Things They Carry*, O’Brien also displays his inaptitude to analyse another culture objectively. The main character, whom the author gave his own name of Tim O’Brien, is traumatised by the sight of a dead enemy – the one he thinks he killed. As he stares at the body, he imagines the man’s life and thoughts, as if they were the same:

He had been born, maybe, in 1946 in the village of My Khe near the central coastline of Quang Ngai Province, where his parents farmed, and where his family had lived for several centuries, and where, during the time of the French, his father and two uncles, and many neighbors had joined the struggle for independence. He was not a Communist. He was a citizen and a soldier [...] from his earliest boyhood the man I killed would have listened to stories about the heroic Trung sisters and Tran Hung Dao’s famous rout of the Mongols and Le Loi’s final victory over the Chinese at Tot Dong. He would have been taught that to defend the land was a man’s highest duty and highest privilege. He had accepted that. It was never open to question [...] he was afraid of disgracing himself, and therefore his family and village [...] he enlisted as a common rifleman with the 48th Vietcong Battalion. He knew he would die quickly. (O’Brien 1998, 119–24)

O’Brien creates this young man’s history as if it were his own, born the same year, with almost identical convictions and personal history. By that O’Brien implies that American values and upbringing are universal, or at least should be.

What created a tremendous sense of frustration and anger for Kayla Williams were the constant changes in the rules of engagement that dictated who posed a possible threat to American soldiers. This ultimately led her to a change of hearts toward the locals:

I consider myself a reasonably compassionate person. I speak the language; I have Arab friends, so I believe that I am better equipped than most soldiers to see these civilians as people. Not simply as *the enemy*. But even for me there are times I am feeling overwhelmed by the situation. God, why can’t we just kill everyone – or leave them to fucking kill each other? Because I cannot care anymore. I cannot walk this line all the time. It’s too hard. I get too angry.

Increasingly many of us are just feeling angry all the time. When we think about the population now, we’re thinking: What are you people doing? We’re here to help you! And you’re trying to kill us! Are you insane? Do you even *want* peace? Or Freedom? Or democracy? Do you want anything? Or do you just want to kill all the time? What’s wrong with you?

What’s wrong with these people? (Williams and Staub 2005, 238)

Being understanding and appreciative of another culture becomes unbearable for Kayla toward the end of her deployment. Therefore, she clearly takes her stand as an American now presuming that the whole ‘normal and sane’ world should hold freedom and democracy as holy as Americans do.

As for Buzzell, he is more frustrated by the American military system and strategy in Iraq than by the locals. Even though he is often critical and satirical of those aspects in his writings, he still complies and accepts all that is happening. For example, he participated in shooting down the mosque in Mosul (“Jesus Christ, I can’t believe I’m actually shooting at a holy place of worship.” I thought we weren’t allowed to do this kind of think. Fuck it.” (Buzzell 2007, 134–35)), and felt both horrible and ridiculous when they were driving over Iraqi graves.

### 3.4 Hate

Finally, the built-up frustration eventually turns into an open hatred for the whole culture. Soldiers now rarely discriminate between the enemy and the civilians, and start treating everybody the same. In *If I Die*, O’Brien testifies that the war turned into mere survival and retaliation for lost comrades in the form of burning Vietnamese hamlets and torturing everybody and everything in sight: “It was good to walk from Pinkville and to see fire behind Alpha Company. It was good, just as pure hate was good” (1999b, 119). Caputo (1996, 119) speaks of an almost identical scenario: “You let the VC use your village for an ambush site, I think, and now you’re paying the price [...] These villagers aided the VC, and we taught them a lesson. We were learning to hate.”

The culmination of hatred for Kayla happened when she was asked to participate in the interrogation of Iraqi civilians; her function there was not to be an interrogator but to humiliate:

I found myself yelling. I found myself calling this jerk every insulting name I knew [...] It was making me even angrier that the guy knew we couldn’t touch him – or he was so drunk that he didn’t care if we did [...] I grabbed a broom handle and banged it loud on some pipe attached to the wall.

“Rise and fucking shine, you asshole!”

Yet yelling at this guy did feel so perversely good. Because it was something I was allowed to do. No one does this in our society; we don’t just decide we can scream at random people who have their hands tied and who have no power to resist.

I don’t like to admit it, but I enjoyed having power over this guy. (Williams and Staub 2005, 204–5)

Such frustration is a by-product of their own sense of helplessness. Soon, Kayla is again asked to participate in interrogation, but they need her now because she is a woman and because she can humiliate more:

I am told what they will want me to do.

“We are going to bring these guys in. One at the time. Remove their clothes. Strip them naked. Then we will remove the guy’s blindfold. And we want you to say things to humiliate them. Whatever you want. Things to embarrass him. Whatever you can say to humiliate them.”

[...]

The civilian interpreter and the interrogator (who also speaks Arabic) mock the prisoner. Mock his manhood. Mock his sexual prowess. Ridicule the size of his genitals. Point to me. Remind him that he is being humiliated in the presence of this blond American female. Anything. Anything that comes to mind [...] I am prompted to participate. To mock this

naked and crying man [...] “Do you think you can please a woman with that thing??” I ask gesturing. (Williams and Staub 2005, 247–48)

By the end of her deployment, Kayla (Williams and Staub 2005, 253–54) admits that she is “very close to hating the Iraqi people” and she offers even more justifications for her fellow soldiers even when they commit atrocities: “Understand that these are not bad people. They were simply people who were beyond frustrated. Beyond angry. Beyond bitter.”

## 4 Conclusion

Americans have fought wars the same way since the beginning of their independence. In the majority of cases, their way of war had a positive outcome for them. However, when, by the late 20th century, wars became clashes between civilisations and not ideological conflicts, the USA started to lose its ground. Why? One of the possible answers is that Americans still see war as a conflict of ideas (always presuming that their ideas are more enlightened than those of their enemies) and disregard the importance of culture.

The American myth is central to American identity and integrity, and they have the right to believe in it. However, the analysis of the novels presented here suggests just how difficult it becomes to appreciate the Other and how easy it is to deny that same right to others, especially in a stressful situation. The discourse of tolerance and acceptance disappears once the Other dares to disturb the West. To illustrate, the U.S. Secretary of state John Kerry described the Charlie Hebdo attacks as “a larger confrontation, not between civilizations, but between civilization itself and those who are opposed to a civilized world” (quoted in Younge 2015). Even though Kerry did not utter the word ‘West’, one might easily assume that he categorized the world in terms of the victim (the journalists/the good/the West) and the attacker (the terrorists/the bad/all that attack the West).

Even if American soldiers in Iraq received more cultural training than those in the Vietnam War, the efforts proved futile. It is more than obvious that it takes open-mindedness, tolerance, time, and inclusion to begin to comprehend, accept, and appreciate different cultures. The key problem seems to be that violence and war on the one hand and open-mindedness and tolerance on the other mutually exclude each other.

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