Diplomová práce

Popular Geopolitics in the USA – reflection, portrayal and mediation of the 2003 Iraq War through the prism of selected types of popular media

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Prohlašuji, že jsem práci zpracoval samostatně a použil jen uvedených pramenů a literatury.

Plzeň, duben 2016 ……..

Allow me to cordially express my sincerest gratitude to David Šanc, an indispensable supervisor who, much like Mercator or Henry the Navigator, assisted me in crossing the stormy, yet thoroughly enjoyable and horizon-broadening seas of academic writing. Given how complex and far-reaching a phenomenon the Iraq War and popular geopolitics have turned out to be, the author is grateful for Mr. Šanc's thoughtfulness and incisive remarks that helped us never lose the sight of what was important, and, ultimately, stay on course. Language-wise, the author himself is sometimes prone to resorting to colourful vocabulary unbefitting of analytical language. As such, Václav Skyland Kobylak has been equally instrumental in improving the overall cohesion, conciseness and clarity of our postulations throughout the following thesis and rightfully deserves my plentiful thanks. Far from being a pleasure cruise, the author also wishes to appreciate the unfaltering support his beloved teachers as well as close friends from both the Czech Republic and around the globe showed. For without them all, my recent personal struggles would have simply proved too much to handle and may have rendered the completion of this voluminous task impossible. Nevertheless, the author takes full responsibility for any shortcomings of the thesis you are about to read that may have occurred along the way.

Contents

1. Introduction: Popular culture goes to war

The main aim of this master thesis is to conduct a thorough analysis of the far-reaching impact and influence the 2003 Iraq War have had on the tremendously rich and diverse world of popular media in the USA. For ever since the ill-equipped beginnings of *Operation Desert Strom* and, consequently, the entire Iraqi spectacle have led to a widespread public disillusionment with, and distrust, of the American political leadership unprecedented in its magnitude and vocality. Therefore, popular geopolitics, itself the latest branch of critical geopolitics rising to prominence especially in the post-Cold War era, could not stand aside or simply escape the daunting reality of an unfolding military fiasco.

As such, we shall employ the insightful prism of four distinct, yet mutually supportive areas or subsets of popular geopolitics – comic books (cartoons), movies, popular music and, last but not least, videogames in order to examine and closely assess the overall interconnectedness, perhaps even a causal link, among the straightforward course of American foreign policy toward Iraq heightened in the 9/11 aftermath. Being charted by the Bush administration, the sweeping and, later, waning public support for the war effort, as well as the abovementioned popular media's depiction of a military endeavour, have been struggling to adjust to what many had considered a lost cause long before the humble origins of the Iraqi fiasco. Nevertheless, as illuminating as a comparison of all American, European as well as Arabian popular media's depiction of the 2003 Iraq War would prove to be, it remains far beyond the reach and scope of the presented master thesis and thus we intend to firmly stay within the American context.

Albeit being left in dysfunctional tatters and providing fertile ground for the consequent, rather than subsequent, emergence of the sweeping phenomenon of the Islamic State, ISIS will only be mentioned in the passing as an unfortunate and lamentable by-product of a tediously unsuccessful state-(re)building process the outcomes of which have reverberated across the region and did much to contribute to its long-term instability.

To gain insight built on a comprehensive understanding of the Bush administration's rationale for taking Iraq by storm after having spent much of the previous decade containing Saddam's regime with relative ease, the first chapter of the presented master thesis will be centred on providing a brief historical background to several decades of an uneasy coexistence between the USA and post-British Iraq. Rather than focus on the overarching tumultuousness of the entire region, for the purpose of this thesis it bears much more significance to fix our gaze upon the first Gulf War making the news'

headlines in the early 1990s. This logical starting point thus represents a welcome occasion that marked the inception of America's much closer geopolitical pivot to Iraq.

Drawing from the vested expertise of various scholars, commentators as well as actual participants of the military encounters, the first chapter will then proceed to follow the Bush and Clinton administrations most crucial decisions, errors of judgment, and also miscalculations and distortions of the subject matter. Therefore, instead of examining in depth each individual war operation or nitpick the overly confident and boisterous rhetoric espoused by those in charge, we seek to provide a basic overview of the successes and failures or the 2003 Iraq War, its post-Gulf and, equally important, post-9/11 period countdown, the pivotal turning points during the protracted conflict and the aftermath, embedded in a clear timeline.

To this end the author wishes to build upon fairly sagacious, yet largely sober, accounts of the entire Iraq debacle; accounts that bring together domestic and international politics, media, history and, above all, offer a well-balanced, stunningly impartial overview authentically capturing the essence of the turbulent buildup as well as the actual execution of the invasion. Thus, Thomas E. Ricks' *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, Charles Duelfer's *Hide and Seek: The Search for Truth in Iraq*, Rob Simpson's *50 Ways to Spend the Trillion Dollars We've Spent on Iraq* and Bilmes' and Stiglitz's treatise audaciously titled *The Three Trillion Dollar War* will serve as a solid backbone, almost unanimously critical of the unfolding grave cataclysm, that would then be perceived, understood, contextualized and dissected through the unique prisms, interpretative perspectives and visual as well as rhetorical narratives associated with the aforementioned four types of popular media throughout the course of the second chapter.

Whereas chapter one sought to deliver a credible and valid overview of the build-up to, the dragged out course of, same as the underwhelming aftermath of the Iraqi theatre of war, chapter two will then attempt to offer comprehensive insight into four selected types of popular media and their eager, but at times uneasy or even implicitly unwilling, engagement with the Iraq War. Suffice to say that those four kinds of popular media – comic books (cartoons/graphic novels), movies, popular music and videogames – were not chosen arbitrarily.

Not only do those form the actual crux of contemporary research conducted in the field of popular geopolitics and thus remain well entrenched within the methodological confinements of this latest subset of critical geopolitics, but also help to ensure sufficient relevance, analytical diversity and richness while lending the author's vested efforts to build bridges between world politics and popular culture (*the PCWP nexus*) an air of

credibility. Popular geopolitics thus provides a vital facet embellishing and further extending the original dichotomy between formal and practical geopolitics. Whereas the former is embodied by academia, think-tanks and those producing geopolitical knowledge in general, the latter constitutes geopolitical practice that lies within everyday functioning of a government and its construction as well as interpretation of the world. It also draws from formal geopolitics' knowledge production to provide rationale for either domestic or foreign policies.

Linking popular perceptions and geopolitical imagination to the two aforementioned types of geopolitics – formal and practical – can be attributed to Gearóid Ó Tuathail whose towering publications titled simply *Critical Geopolitics* (1994) postulated a tri-partite scheme connecting all three kinds of geopolitics in what he termed "*geopolitical representations of self and other*". Despite being in its infancy and at a very early academic stage which saw popular geopolitics rise to academic acceptance as a legitimate area of research over the course of the past 20 years, we believe that the occasional derision and criticism uttered by those who wish to tarnish its alleged lack of analytical tools or methodological incoherence are rather misplaced. For we need to realize that those are the growing, yet understandable, pitfalls of a field conducting research on popular culture, itself a largely elusive, even effervescent playground, to which standard positivist methods of knowledge production can seldom be applied, hence the strong constructivist bent of the overwhelming majority of the authors whose major works have met with considerable academic acclaim.

Last year's release of a groundbreaking book fashionably titled *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (2015, ed. by F. Caso and C. Hamilton) represents a case in point and a crucial title that further elucidates *the PCWP nexus* while providing, in tandem with Tuathail's *Critical Geopolitics* (1996), Austin's much-cited *How to do things with words* (2000), Dodds' and Dittmer's books and articles and author's own insights grounded in his theses or papers, a rich theoretical and methodological basis with which to frame chapter two.

After a condensed outline of, and a succinct introduction to, popular geopolitics, chapter two will then move on to analyzing each individual type of popular media and contextualizing it within its own sphere of existence. As stated earlier, apart from covering almost the entire span of popular geopoliticians' research interests (bar mass media and the Internet), those popular forms of media all chose different ways of engaging with the 2003 Iraq War ranging from a tacit approval, over implicit criticism, to fierce and outspoken opposition to the unfolding spectacle.

Our task will then involve uncovering the underlining themes of each popular media's engagement, their individual messages that they sought to convey to its target audience and the striking similarities same as abysmal incongruence comic books (cartoons/graphic novels), movies, popular music and videogames have exhibited since 2003. Even if such commendable efforts to address the Iraq War have not always met with commercial success, it is of crucial importance to bear in mind the unmistakable impact 9/11 (have) had on the diverse world of American popular culture. Therefore, the tragic events of 9/11 and its implications for these four kinds of popular media explored here will also be referred to where deemed necessary as omitting them would render our journey incomplete. However radical a departure from previously passionate patriotic feelings the Iraq War marked, we wish to argue that the 2003 invasion is best perceived as a continuation, an extension of the widespread political as well as public disillusionment with America's demoralizing vulnerability in the wake of 9/11. And popular culture was there to console, provide solace, entertain, rally, sometimes even guide and warn before overreacting to what was to come.

Thanks to a wide range of authors and their voluminous treatises on our selected kinds of popular media (i.e. Dittmer (2010), Dodds (2008), Luce (2005), Scott (2011), Dalby (2006), Agnew (2008), Bogost (2009), Shapiro (2009)) as well as the author's own expertise and long-term engagement with the said field we will then endeavour to interconnect and bring together insights from mutually supportive areas that popular geopolitics itself greatly draws from, such as culture studies, critical security studies, audience studies, media studies, visual ethnography etc. Navigating through the precarious period of such contemporary phenomena *does* pose a risk of being lost in the details while failing to notice the bigger picture and that is precisely why a set of four comprehensive research questions with which to shelter our academic efforts has been developed.

1. Based on what evidence and geopolitical rationale did the second Bush administration defend and justify its misguided decision to take Iraq by force? Were the underlining motives defensible or at least stemming from legitimate preemptive as well as preventive concerns?

2. What tangible impact did American foreign policy in the post-9/11 countdown to the Iraq War have on the growing world of popular geopolitics in the USA? Does the era from 2003 onward mark a noticeable departure from the 9/11 widespread patriotic sentiment?

3. Which components of this government-approved geopolitical narrative rooted in a continuing war on terrorism did the four types of popular media choose to engage with, reflect, mediate and securitize? What were the most typical rhetorical, stylistic, musical and, to a great extent, visual tools employed by the creators of popular media to address the Iraq War?

4. Is it possible to uncover any common features shared among comic books, movies, popular music and videogames in their eager engagement with the 2003 Iraq War? Were there any principal differences among each popular media's overarching message about the Iraq War and did being more openly critical about the ongoing war warrant lower sales of the end product or vice versa?

2. The 2003 Iraq War: the origins of America's long-term involvement in the perennial cradle of conflict and the costliest foreign policy fiasco since Vietnam

"Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

—Jimmy Carter, state of the union address, Jan. 23, 1980

2.1 Iraq – past and present, the pre-Gulf War pivot

Judging in retrospect, these prophetic words uttered by the late Jimmy Carter clearly hint at vital, even pivotal, importance the USA has ascribed to the Persian Gulf region the centre of gravity of which Iraq has throughout the 20th century become. Thus, not only was the grave geopolitical miscalculation of 2003 long in the making, but one might best understand it as a combustive concoction of distorted assertions based on scant evidence, long history of America's military, political as well as economic involvement in the actual region together with unprecedentedly heightened domestic environment over which the smouldering image of 9/11 still loomed large.

The legacy of Iraq, a wider historical region known as Mesopotamia and endowed, thanks to geological forces, with abundant natural resources, has been that of sharp ambivalence. On the one hand, various civilizations and City-States alike located in this fertile crescent witnessed unrivalled prosperity, which in turn accelerated the development of early arts and science, and gave birth to what historians label "*cuneiform writing*". Yet on the other, its mineral richness made the relatively hospitable territory of Iraq subject to many wars waged by competing nations and empires (Persians, Greeks, Arabs just to name a few) since time immemorial. In failing to understand the abysmal disparity of historical and geopolitical roots between the US and Iraq, both sides, at times, misunderstood the often ambiguous intentions of one another, which has led to mistaken assessments at best, and to many lives lost at worst (Duelfer, 2009, pp. 18–22).

The shadow of Iraq that has haunted, and occasionally caught up with, both the Bush as well as Obama administrations is now threatening to come full circle. For the destructive, yet at first sweepingly successful, activities of the Islamic State, itself largely built on the tatters left behind the American occupation of Iraq, exert control over much greater swaths than America, even at the height of its military power, was able to command. Naturally, sounding the retreat horn by Barack Obama in 2010 seems to have catalyzed the violent transition that Iraq would be soon plunged into. Furthermore, the high costs of the Iraqi theatre of war in terms of troops killed (over five thousand), returning soldiers suffering from serious health and mental disorders (over one hundred thousand), Iraqis displaced (well over two million) and Iraqi refugees who have fled their

country (nearing three million) are indeed rather far from labelling American military involvement in Iraq a successful venture or better yet, a mission accomplished (BBC, 2011, Stiglitz, Bilmes, 2008, pp. 1–3).

The costly failure – reaching, according to sober estimates conducted by Stiglitz and Bilmes (2008, p. 5) over three trillion dollars – to foster and oversee a geopolitical shift that would further favour American politically- same as economically-driven interests in the region needs to be contextualized with Saddam's rise to presidency in 1979 that followed a brief interwar intermezzo under British rule (Jones, 2012, pp. 208–210). Saddam, himself a hard-working member of the Baathist Party, which sought to tap into the growing sentiment of Arab nationalism, steadily rose to prominence as the leader of the Arab nation of Iraq the strength of which would be tantamount to its leader's perceived domestic and foreign prestige (Duelfer, 2009, pp. 20–22). It is thus reasonable to assume, and some cautious voices in the Bush administration did, that ousting Saddam and planting a seed of democracy in a turbulent region that of which stability has usually rested on the goodwill, or whimsies, of its neighbours cooperating with two intervening Cold War great powers, would soon prove to be no easy undertaking the gravity of which America seriously underestimated. Some historians as well as contemporary academics are then led to believe that had more of the lessons learned from the Vietnam War found fertile soil among U.S. Army as well as the consecutive administrations, the Iraqi fiasco could have been averted altogether.

For us, though, it remains of more importance to return to the opening quotation by Jimmy Carter, which implicitly signalled that the military pattern originating the Persian Gulf throughout the 1970s, the ensuing oil shocks and, generally speaking, the altering international geopolitical dynamics would inevitably collide and pave the way for much turmoil reverberating across the Middle East. What Jones (2012) termed "the pattern of militarism" is perhaps best understood as a convoluted product of American deliberate support for various authoritarian regimes in the Gulf region with the overarching influence of putting the growing influence of the Soviet Union in the region on a halt (pp. 209–210). Given America's historical ambivalence between its Israel-friendly foreign policy, frowned upon by region's key oil producers, and the very oil producers around which American corporate and political interests were increasingly converging (p. 211). Yet committing over 22 billion USD in arms sales to Iran between 1970 and 1979, and nearly 3.5 billion USD to Saudi Arabia did much to exacerbate the already mounting tensions and, perhaps worst of all, emboldened two particular Gulf dictators to a devastating stand-off that would last for a decade (p. 212).

Furthermore, during the 1975–1979 Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia accounted for more than half of all the weapons sold in the Middle East while making close to one-quarter of all global arms purchases (Jones, 2012, p. 213). America and the growing military-industrial complexes on both ends of the deal were happy to oblige. After having failed to align the formerly pro-Western, British-built, royalist government of Iraq with the West through the Baghdad Pact, Iraq emerged as a de facto independent power on the international stage in the aftermath of the 1958 revolution (Hahn, 2014). And although struggling with the delicate Kurdish problem the solution of which seems to be as far away in 2016 as in 1960, it was only in 1979 when Saddam Hussein – himself a secularist posing as a crucial bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism – faced up against Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who seized power in the same year and publicly sought to proselytize his revolutionary ideals throughout the Middle East (Hahn, 2014). At home President Carter's public support was at an all-time low given the looming American embassy fiasco in Tehran just as Soviets were rallying to launch an offensive into Afghanistan and in doing so embroiling themselves in what Duelfer (2009) titled "*their own Vietnam War* (p. 28)."

After an unsuccessful assassination of Tariq Aziz, Saddam's leading moderate advisor, and in the light of a consolidating Shia theocracy next-door America was alarmed about not least due to the oil choke points, his instinctive understanding of power and leverage provided irresistible rationale for unleashing a war upon Iran on September 22, 1980 (Duelfer, 2009, pp. 30–32). Driven by America's explicit assurance that Washington could and would not afford for Bagdad to lose – a message repeatedly sent by both Secretary of State George Schulz as well as Donald Rumsfeld, a special envoy, and one of the architects of the 2003 Iraq War, to Saddam Hussein in 1983 – Saddam's full-scale invasion initially led to occupying over 10 000 square miles of Iranian territory before being stymied by Iranians and eventually repented with the lost areas soon regained.

Despite providing intelligence, weapons and funding to both sides and in doing so bogging down two of the Gulf region's most militarized regimes, it was finally a threat to oil shipping that tipped the scales of American involvement completely in favour of Iraq even knowing full well of its usage of chemical weapons to stave off devastating human wave attacks mounted by Iran (Jones, 2012, pp. 214–215, Duelfer, 2009, pp. 34–35). With hundreds of thousands dead on both belligerents' sides engaged in a bloody and protracted stalemate since 1982, it was only in the late 1980s that the proxy war Iraq was fighting on America's behalf would slowly begin to change (Gause, 2002, p. 56). The tipping point came in 1986, at a time when Iran's strategy of burning Iraq out of resources and bodies led to its considerable exhaustion and indebtedness, when Kuwait called for

protection from both the US and the Soviet Union alike to safeguard its oil tankers under attack by Iran. In accordance with the Carter doctrine, the US was swift to dispatch a large naval fleet and even sank several Iranian warships. Eventually, U.S. military shooting down an Iranian passenger jet and killing nearly 300 passengers aboard dealt Iran a stunning blow (Gause, 2002, pp. 81–85) thus paving the way for an uneasy ceasefire resolution drafted by the international community (Hahn, 2014, Duelfer, 2009, p. 34).

Nevertheless, containing both Khomeini as well as Hussein under the auspices of this legal framework while naively hoping to bring a semblance of stability to a troubled and ravaged region meant negating the lessons of his dreadful human rights abuses, aggressive, opportunistic proclivities. For building a grand Middle East geopolitical strategy on such flimsy and unpredictable premises and foundation of Saddam's regime in a tempestuous period of constantly increasing demand for oil supplies would soon prove unwise and backfire badly (Hahn, 2014, Jones, 2012, p. 216).

2.2 The 1991 Gulf War, a cornerstone for future failures and Saddam's miscalculations?

Many authors unanimously agree that the 2003 Iraq War cannot be viewed in isolation. Instead, the chain and sequence of events leading to it must be contextualized with the inconclusiveness of the 1991 Iraq War and the continued US efforts to contain Saddam in the following years (Stiglitz, 2008, pp. 3–4, Ricks, 2006, pp. 2–3, Duelfer, 2009, pp. 59–62, Hyndman, 2004, p. 381). Saddam's grand rhetoric drawing inspiration from his region's ancient past linking his rule to that of Nebuchadnezzar and other kings, in tandem with the lessons learned from the Chadian conflict with Libya produced a rather delusional environment which led Saddam to believe the likelihood of American interference in his regional ambitions to be virtually non-existent.

Yet this false worldview still embedded in the Cold War rationale would soon make Saddam gravely miscalculate again, for the fashionable catchphrase "*new world order*" penned by Wolfowitz in the early 1990s turned out to signalize the inception of a new era in which former guiding principles no longer unanimously applied. In addition to being pressurized by the imposed quotas on oil production capacity, Iraq also accused Kuwait of stealing 2 billion USD worth of oil from the lucrative Rumaila oil field. And so when Saddam's aggressive speech in April 1990 showed his unabated willingness to thrust into any direction while proudly announcing the possession of more powerful chemical weapons ready to obliterate half of Israel, Washington, again, stood alarmed (Duelfer, 2009, pp. 58–60). August 1990 – when Saddam pursued a military solution of

taking Kuwait by force – marked the final prelude to what Jones (2012) eloquently phrased "*the permanent shadow of war [that] has settled over the Persian Gulf"* which he clearly attributes to tying oil to American national security that in turn made, among American policy makers, the link between security and militarization inseparable (pp. 216–217, *War in Iraq* (2010), Gause, 2002, p. 86).

Thus, when Bush's constructive efforts to deal with Saddam on friendly terms were left in tatters, the US sought to "go by the book" and follow UN resolutions in what entered American history as the largest military campaign since the fiasco of Vietnam. Conducting two strategic initiatives – one centred on deterrence under *Operation Desert Shield* and the second on military action consisting of amassing coalition forces alongside Iraqi and Kuwaiti borders, Iraq was then pressured to abandon its conquest of Kuwait, yet to no avail (Hahn, 2012). The UN-authorized *Operation Desert Storm*, which featured five weeks of devastating aerial assaults on Iraqi military, political and communications targets, was soon followed by a ground invasion that effectively drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. And that was about it.

However, it was precisely this unfinished nature of the 1991 war that planted the seeds of a future whirlwind.[1] Halting a march on Baghdad and to a swift deposal of Saddam, Bush, himself a former CIA director, a UN ambassador as well as a vice-president under Reagan, knew better than anyone how the international system worked and undoubtedly sought not to breach the UN mandate (Duelfer, 2009, pp. 65–66, Gause, 2002, pp. 89–90). Yet even if amassing domestic as well as international support for *Operation Desert Storm* proved to be a strenuous task[2], the aftermath of Saddam's defeat reveals a jarring portrait of the ill-conceived coercive disarmament tantamount to the *Treaty of Versailles (*Duelfer, 2009, p. 72).

Strangely enough, Sidaway (1998, pp. 235–236) expertly unweaved the underlining resemblances between the dominant representations of the Gulf War, being covered 24/7 by *CNN* lending this televised display of power much appeal, and the geopolitical rhetoric espoused by Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski whose resolute and clear-cut postulations dovetailed with the seemingly unstoppable vision of a "new world order" disallowing for any alternatives too.

Never mind the SCUD missiles; Ricks (2006) is convinced that the then American government erred in three crucial areas when it comes to managing post-Gulf War Iraq.

[1] Perhaps even a cataclysmic vortex that would burden consecutive American governments.

[2] After all, the Senate authorized the use of force by a slim margin of 52 to 47, anathema to a whopping 77 to 23 more than a decade later (Duelfer, 2009, p. 72).

First, two years later Paul Wolfowitz, the most senior official in the first Bush administration – among the likes of Colin Powell and Dick Cheney – penned an unusually critical essay on the spoils of the Gulf War dissecting a miscalculation that *"[…] a rapid disengagement was essential to preserve the lustre of victory, and to avoid getting stuck with post-war objectives that would prevent us from getting disengaged.* (Ricks, 2006, p. 7)." Thus, while the US incited a rebellion of the Shiites and Kurds against Saddam's rule, it did nothing to support them and, literally, stood by as they were being crushed and slaughtered by the unexpectedly resilient regime. Far from being defeated, Saddam merely withdrew his forces from Kuwait so as to launch a fierce internal offensive to quench the revolting Shiites and Kurds who died and fled by thousands (Gause, 2002, pp. 95–100). Third, another critical misjudgement lies in a false assumption about the inevitability of Saddam's fall. Failing to break his firm grip on power, Desert Storm's perhaps most paramount objective of destroying the Republican Guard corps remained dauntingly unaccomplished and it is estimated that as many as 80 000 members of the abovementioned Guard including hundreds of tanks and a swath of other military vehicles went on to ruthlessly suppress the unfolding uprisings across Iraq (Ricks, 2006, pp. 5–6).

Much like some would argue that the Treaty of Versailles engendered German discontent rather than transcended it, or that Munich was, after all, anything but a success story for Hitler, Macgregor, the author of the eerily prescient 1997 book *Breaking the Phalanx* surmised that the 1991 Gulf War amounted to a strategic defeat and a reason for contemplation, rather than a source of celebration regarding America's future involvement in the Middle East. With that in mind, coercive disarmament as a method of containment enshrined in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 687 merely bought more time; in fact, a little over a decade. Yet even Charles de Gaulle is believed to have once pointedly remarked that: "*Treaties are like roses and young girls. They last while they last*. (Duelfer, 2009, p. 74)" With the creation of UNSCOM – United Nations Special Commission on Iraq – the Security Council endowed the chairman of UNSCOM with a powerful tool allowing him to officially specify and select sites for inspection in Iraq so as to oversee Iraq's compliance with the imposed disarmament expectations.

However, we need to realize that it was Iraq upon which the burden of proof lay, rather than the UNSCOM inspectors, who would be tasked to simply verify Iraq's claims about, rather than thoroughly seek and search for, concealed weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, the inspectors were supposed to investigate a defeated nation, not an occupied territory, which presented Saddam and his aides manifold opportunities for an increasingly complicated game of deception and access denial, which kept further eroding the already difficult enforceability of the UNSCR 687 and serves to prove that translating

words on paper into a functioning and operational regime (Duelfer, pp. 80–82) was an extraordinary task indeed.

During the 1990s the United States, with the notable, yet occasional, assistance of France and Great Britain, sought to "keep a lid" on Saddam's regime and ensure effective functioning of its containment policy under the auspices of the UN. Through a humanitarian operation called Provide Comfort and the decisive imposition of multiple fly-zones to protect Iraqi civilians or minorities general Zinni, the commander of US forces in the Gulf War, believed that Saddam's regime was gradually decaying as the 1990s drew to their close (Ricks, 2006, pp. 12–13); a point of view shared by Gause (2002), Graham (1999) as well as Gordon (2010).

Bolstered by Bush's failed 1992 re-election bid, Saddam kept hindering the UNSCOM inspectors' manoeuvrability even if, judging in retrospect, he did remove the overwhelming majority of his chemical and biological stocks, yet would prove unwilling to let the inspectors verify that. And so with the cost of the no-fly zones being roughly 1.5 billion dollars a year, a slightly more than the bill of occupying Iraq for a week mere 10 years later (Duelfer, 2009, p. 85), Saddam's occasional jostling and aggressive rhetoric toward Iraq's neighbours as well as the US did much to keep America vigil. Yet the Clinton administration, itself categorically refusing any form of dialogue with Iraq that e.g. offered its help with intelligence on the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and at times exaggerating the official UNSCOM estimates about the remainder of the SCUD missiles at Saddam's disposal, continued the rails of a tepid and half-hearted commitment to containing Iraq through UN sanctions, oil embargo (Duelfer, 2009, pp. 85–86) and from time to time an active display of force materialized in the four-day-long bombing campaign known as *Desert Fox* (Ricks, 2006, pp. 18–19). Nevertheless, at home, one of the crown architects of the 2003 Iraq War was growing increasingly disillusioned with the lukewarmly enforced containment policy. Meanwhile, Dick Cheney, then a CEO of Halliburton, was touring the region to provide oil services and logistics on behalf of his company.

Paul Wolfowitz, himself scarred by the Holocaust the perils of which most of his extended Polish family did not escape, went publicly to great lengths to draw parallels and analogies between Hussein's regime and Nazi Germany. Thus, comparing Saddam to a modern-day Hitler in line with Stalin and Kim Jong Il, had the well-known effect of putting all advocates of the containment policy on the defensive; as the "foolish" and dangerously naive likes of Chamberlain (Ricks, 2006, pp. 15–17). His overall likability in tandem with low-key manner masking tough-minded, hawkish determination did much to lend him public attention. Furthermore, Wolfowitz, unlike others, paid a great deal of

attention to Iraqi citizens whose continuing suffering was, in his words, being protracted by the containment policy; a double-edged theme later elaborately explored by Muellers' article *Sanctions of Mass Destruction* released in mid-1999. Postulating that "*Toppling Saddam is the only outcome that can satisfy the vital U.S. interest in a stable and secure Gulf region*" in a 1998 article in the *New Republic* magazine, Wolfowitz, accompanied by Ahmed Chalabi, greatly profited from the soaring data vacuum on Iraq's WMD programme as Iraq was about to end tacit cooperation with UNSCOM (Ricks, 2006, p. 18, Duelfer, 2009, p. 164).

To put it simply, one could not easily disprove such fierce accusations. Exploiting the crumbling consensus at the Security Council to maintain the no-fly zones reinforced by aerial campaigns when deemed necessary and winning world sympathy for civilian casualties wrought upon by air strikes, Saddam Hussein, invoking the increasingly porous economic sanctions as the root cause for the suffering of ordinary Iraqis, appeared to have regained much domestic momentum just as President Clinton, urged by a letter issued by the Project for the New American Century, switched to embrace the "regime change" policy regarding Iraq. Signed by Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, Armitage and many other 'masterminds' who would mere three years later re-install themselves as crucial governmental lynchpins of the 2003 Iraq War, the eighteen signers of this symbolic premonition argued that diplomacy was failing and called for toppling Saddam's regime as the only viable course of action (Ricks, 2006, pp. 16–17). A shame, perhaps, that the largest military operation under Desert Fox since 1991 – which clearly showed the benefits of containment by destabilizing panicking Saddam's regime for months – was conceived of as a ruse for eclipsing Clinton's pending impeachment process (Ricks, 2006, pp. 17).

As the liberal-democratic air of optimism permeating the 1990s was dealt another stunning blow in Kosovo, Iraq was on the verge of economic bonanza stemming from the promising business prospects (Gause, 2002, pp. 128–130). For the sanctions regime, enshrined in the UNSCOM, itself a commendable and unusually bold effort by the UN, met its demise in December 1999 with the new UNSCR 1284 that hinted at lifting the sanctions should Iraq accept less intrusive inspections (Duelfer, 2009, p. 177).

Notwithstanding Chalabi's lobbyists, Iraq was a minuscule issue during the 2000 presidential election which, if anything, led to savouring many speculations and befuddlement in Bagdad that was understandably puzzled by the overall inconclusiveness

of the elections further undermining, in Saddam's view,[3] the last superpower's credentials (Duelfer, 2009, pp. 181, 184). Being unusually quiet on the international front, both Al Gore and George W. Bush favoured renewing the sanctions regime and thus, nothing indicated that things would get any tougher under a new administration. Yet as if often tends to happen, a major game-changer was literally right around the corner. While vowing to "flex American military muscles" more wisely, George W. Bush and his new administration welcomed aboard old, experienced acquaintances – Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, Cheney and Powell – who, at first, sought not[4] to transform Iraq's "containment" into "rollback (Ricks, 2006, pp. 24–28)." Then came 9/11.

2.3 From 9/11 to ISIS

Uncertain of how best to respond to the attacks, Bagdad balanced between doing nothing and offering condolences; ultimately choosing the former even if Hussein himself deemed it a human tragedy. Many among Saddam's aides were painfully slow to realize what Tariq Aziz retrospectively foresaw some years later. He believed the post-9/11 US would seize any opportunity to put the blame, even unjustly, on Iraq. And so, in the 18-month-long build-up and lead-up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, one could witness deliberate fabrications of "facts" based on questionable, or worse yet – blatantly made up – intelligence concerning Iraq's alleged possession of WMD, its "solid" link to a global terrorist network under the auspices of Al-Qaeda and, last but not least, the regime's atrocious, criminal treatment of Iraqi citizens calling for overthrow as the only viable outcome (Duelfer, 2009, pp. 192–193, Ricks, 2006, pp. 29–31, Ahmad, 2014, pp. 105–107).

While the Global War on Terror (GWOT), seeking not just to eliminate the Al-Qaeda terrorist network, but also those who *harbour terrorists*, itself a rather insignificant rhetorical shift, yet with far-reaching implications for American foreign policy, was being institutionalized in the form of the *Patriot Act* and embedded among public through a welter of socially constructed everyday practices and linguistic representations of counterterrorism personae, the planning for the 2003 War in Iraq was quietly green-lit (Jackson, 2011, pp. 391–392, Hahn, 2015). Jackson does not shy away from commending the Bush administration and its supporters on the swiftness with which they adapted to, capitalized on, and tapped into the post-9/11 sentiment, which, reinforced by widely

[3] Who himself won 99.96% of the vote in the 1995 elections, reaching to a stellar 100% in 2002 (Duelfer, 2009, p. 186).

[4] Bar, of course, Wolfowitz. (Ricks, 2006, p. 27).

popular(ised) notions of "American exceptionalism" and Manifest destiny" served to lend further credibility to the dominant narrative of the war on terror and discredit as well as delegitimize any alternatives (Jackson, 2011, pp. 397–398). Much like Duelfer himself attempted to approach Iraq from Kofi Annan's perspective of violating a state's sovereignty when the internal conditions – e.g. mass suffering, or non-compliance with UN sanctions – made inviolability secondary, so too did his bold effort fall on deaf ears of various administration officials (Duelfer, 2009, pp. 195–196).

For not only did GWOT declare war on a terrorist organization that, in 2003, was believed to have cells in approximately 60 countries, it also aimed to eradicate terrorism, a method of violence, alongside it. While threatening or using force to topple foreign regimes is indeed nothing new regarding American foreign policy throughout centuries, Record poignantly reckons that "*taking the eyes off the ball*" and broadening, diluting the war on terror so as to encompass the axis of evil and literally all terrorist organizations globally amounted to a tremendous mistake (2003, p. 23). Drawing from both the discursive as well as institutional architecture left behind by Reagan administration's 'war on terrorism' throughout the 1980s, it is then reasonable to believe that the Bush administration had ready-made tools and US security institutions to employ, not to mention the attuned public, in order to conflate the deemed threat Iraq posed with the post-9/11 reality abounding with patriotic feelings.

Thus, Record convincingly argues that Iraq is best understood as a war of choice, rather than a war of necessity (2003, p. 19). "[…]*conflating Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda, the administration unnecessarily expanded the GWOT by launching a preventive war against a state that was not at war with the United States and that posed no direct or imminent threat to the United States at the expense of continued attention and effort to protect the United States from a terrorist organization with which the United States* ***was*** *at war* (2003, p. 18)*."* Gen. Keane, the army's 'number-two' officer also favoured ditching the Iraq question so that the US could focus on the ball at hand – Afghanistan and capturing Bin Laden (Ricks, 2006, p. 33). However, no war is ultimately inevitable. It needs its agents – warmongers if you will, a permissive environment as well as popular support.

In a post-9/11 reality shattering the deeply held notion of American invulnerability, black and white, binary distinctions loomed large. And with the Huntingtonian paradigm serving as a welcome self-explanatory scapegoat amplifying the growing gap between 'us', or even 'the US', and 'them' (Hostýnek, 2013, p. 187), it is evident that the 9/11 attacks caught the Pentagon fairly off-guard. For the neoconservative hawks – Defence Secretary Rumsfeld, his deputy Wolfowitz, Vice-President Cheney and

numerous other 'middle men or women', such as Lewis Libby,[5] Stephen Hadley,[6] Douglas Feith,[7] Newt Gingrich[8] and William Luti[9] grew increasingly disillusioned with the cautious response the State Department, the Pentagon, the CIA and the Army could muster (Ahmad, 2014, pp. 131–132, 143, Ricks, 2006, p. 33). Simply put, Afghanistan would become a mere springboard for a widespread geopolitical redrawing of the Middle East.

Caught amidst Rumsfeld's impatience and the Army's caution, the Central Command (Centcom), working non-stop since 9/11 and considerably fatigued given the planning for the invasion of Afghanistan, was tasked to conceive of yet another plan for invasion. Ricks (2006) believes it was precisely this extreme fatigue, low morale and rather despotic management of Centcom under Gen. Franks that is to be held responsible for the poorly and disastrously executed post-war occupation of Iraq. Bringing down a hollow, crumbling regime happened to be the easier task, yet replacing Saddam and managing Iraq after the fall of Bagdad was tremendously neglected and given almost no serious thought (p. 33–34).

In the months leading to Bush's 2002 *State of the Union* address one could witness deliberate quenching of voices of dissent among the many governmental departments. Replacing key officials and representatives, the neoconservatives, by purposely tailoring nonsensical evidence about Iraq's pursuit of nuclear weapons, converting uncertainty to facts and leaking 'soundbites' to eager media – the *CNN* and *the Fox News* were the most notable ones – they resourcefully and shamelessly exploited the 9/11 rupture and in doing so succeeded in putting Iraq on the official agenda of war against terror (Ahmad, 2014, pp. 132–133). Under such heavy lobbying, to which Waltz and Mearsheimer would also add the inseparable links to Israel,[10] it comes as no major surprise that Bush's 2002 speech saw Iraq, Iran and North Korea being linked as an 'axis of evil'. Therefore, as Bush eloquently put it, "[the USA] *will not permit the world's most*

[5] Chief of Staff to the Vice President of the United States. In office between 2001 – 2005.

[6] Deputy National Security Advisor (2001 – 2005) and National Security Advisor between 2005 – 2009.

[7] Under Secretary of Defence for Policy; in office between 2001 – 2005.

[8] An informal advisor to the Pentagon throughout the 2000s; also former Speaker of the House.

[9] Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Defence Policy and Strategy for the National Security Council under the Bush administration.

[10] For another factor(s) underscoring the decision to launch a pre-emptive war against Iraq, see their *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy.*

dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons." Such a pointed hawkish speech built on flimsy foundations left Bagdad speechless and finally made Saddam realize that despite his non-existent connection with 9/11 and absence of any nuclear capabilities, Bush's bravado seemed to gather momentum for something bigger (Duelfer, 2009, pp. 200–201).

Even though Saddam was willing to negotiate to readmit the inspectors, he would, as was his style, demand something tangible in exchange. This may have very well broken his neck in the end, because it played right into America's hands demanding unconditional admission of UN inspectors. However, Colin Powell, Secretary of State and one of the last remaining sceptics about Iraq, made a desperate, last-resort gambit to, at worst, derail, at best halt America's quest for using force against Iraq to effect a regime change in the case of its non-compliance with the hastily drafted[11] UN resolution (Duelfer, 2009, p. 201). Aiding him in seeking this legal rationale under the auspices of the UN was the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair who put the 'special relationship' between the UK and America to the test much to the chagrin of Chirac's France and Schröder's Germany (Ash, 2002).

During 2002, not only did Cheney keep sounding the war horn – as evinced by his hawkish speeches in Nashvile or San Antonio in August – which was effectively constraining Bush's range of available scenarios and, at the same time, neutralizing Powell's UN bid, but one could also witness an eager engagement with the media to, I daresay, sell the war. Judith Miller, a war-inclined journalist, whose false claims built on fabricated intelligence provided by Iraqi defectors, happened to be among the most influential ones. Further reinforced by Gerson's catchphrase about the *'smoking gun'* becoming a *'mushroom cloud'*, Ahmad (2014) goes as far as to call these vehement efforts to convince American public as well as the Congress about the immediacy of the threat Iraq allegedly posed a "*sophisticated propaganda apparatus* (p. 146)."

In fact, bar America and Britain, many at the Security Council as well as worldwide were convinced that Saddam's regime was effectively contained and weak. Surprisingly enough, this very assertion would soon serve to "debunk" some common sense estimates of war costs and create a hard-to-miss logical loophole. Rushing out a ninety-page classified document, George Tenet's CIA gave in to much pressure from Rumsfeld's and Cheney's offices and approved of a National Intelligence Estimate filled with fabricated intelligence linking procured aluminium tubes from China and uranium

[11] And, arguably, much weaker in comparison to the one authorizing the creation of UNSCOM (Duelfer, 2009, pp. 201–202).

ore from Niger – as well as the then already discredited (Ahmad, 2014, pp. 152–155) Prague meeting – (Ahmad, 2014, pp. 152–155) to Iraq's efforts to reconstitute its nuclear weapons programme. Securing UN resolution 1441 in November 2002 that warned of serious consequences in case of Iraq's continuous defiance, the Bush administration seriously doubted the conclusions of renewed arms inspectors that Iraq was devoid of WMDs (Hahn, 2015).

In a tumultuous build-up to war, Bush personally asked Collin Powell, the man who fought long and hard to prevent the war, to make the public case for it, use his indisputable credentials and, in fact, sell it at the UN. Resorting to the abovementioned NIE, Powell, in his February 5 address to the UN, used many of the already disproved arguments – Curveball's testimony,[12] the Prague meeting, enriched uranium from Africa etc. – to link Iraq to Al-Qaeda, quench all the dissenting voices doubting Iraq's relentless pursuit of WMDs and, ultimately, make the irrefutable case for war (Ricks, 2006, pp. 89–90, Ahmad, 2014, pp. 158–160). Long story short, it did the job. With American public largely convinced about Iraq's illicit possession of WMDs and democratic opposition in the Congress in tatters, the stage was ready for the US-led 'coalition of the willing' to bypass the UN, unwilling to authorize the use of force against Iraq, completely (Ricks, 2006, pp. 93, Ahmad, 2014, p. 162).

On the eve of war official estimates, constantly repeated on many news channels, claimed the reconstruction of Iraq would basically pay for itself from the oil revenues (Stiglitz, 2008, pp. 19–20) and would cost American taxpayers less than 2 billion USD.[13] Issuing an ultimatum for Saddam on March 17 demanding that he leaves Iraq within 48 hours fell on deaf ears in Bagdad. Furthermore, being convinced that Iraq, the weakest link of the 'axis of evil' would turn out to be a 'cakewalk', the Bush administration's call to arms climaxed on March 19 2003 (Ricks, 2006, p. 95, Duelfer, 2008, p. 38), which marked the beginning of America's most disastrous foreign policy fiasco since at least the Vietnam War.

For the US embarked upon a war for which it was tragically underfinanced, lacked a sufficient number of troops and had virtually no plans for post-war reconstruction. Furthermore, this very decision based on fabricated evidence contributed to alienating its

[12] An Iraqi defector in custody of Germany's BND whose claims proved anything but false (Ahmad, 2014, p. 160).

[13] In 2008, the running expenses exceeded 12.5 billion USD per month (Stiglitz, 2008, p. 19).

allies[14], damaging its global reputation and widening a gap between the deemed 'American, hawkish way' and the 'European, dovish way' of solving issues; itself a theme that would take years to wear off (Kagan (2012), Ash (2004), Habermas (2003), Ahmad, 2014, p. 162, Ricks, 2006, p. 111). Was Iraq to prove that Europeans were indeed from peace-loving Venus, whereas Americans inhabited the warmongering planet of Mars?[15] Yet the worst was still to come. How then will history judge American military endeavours in Iraq between 2003 – the beginning of combat operations – and 2011 – the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces executed by President Obama? For as Ricks eloquently put it: "*In the spring of 2003 the U.S. military fought the battle it wanted to fight, mistakenly believing it would be the only battle it faced* (Ricks, 2006, pp. 115–116).*"*

To trace the origins of the plentiful strategic missteps made, and the castle of sand upon which the Bush administration sought to build its military campaign, one needs to invoke the lessons learned during the Vietnam War. Its devastating and paralyzing effect reverberating since the 1970s led American military to considerably revamp the Army in hopes of maximizing jointness, knowledge as well as precision. In short, American military reoriented its focus on winning the first battle, "shock and awe (Ricks, 2006, p. 132–134)." This painful re-conceptualization did result in American military emerging victorious in the first Gulf war, appearing invincible and standing unrivalled, yet in the long run, it made one wonder whether the U.S. Army still knew how to wage a successful counter-insurgency campaign.

By shying away from the unnerving experience(s) in the murky jungles of Vietnam and by submitting, surrogating the helm of Operation Iraqi Freedom to political leadership – unlike Desert Storm in the 1990s in which the military acted relatively unconstrained (Ricks, 2006, p. 134) – the undermanned and inadequately sized Army that ventured into Iraq in 2003 would soon be stretched to its limits and even way beyond them. Yet during some 500 hours of combat, the invasion force, numbering around 125 000 U.S. soldiers, 20 000 British and 500 Australian troops, achieved a remarkably sweeping victory over Iraqi forces of more than twice the size that fielded over 4000 tanks and various other armoured vehicles. Despite Saddam's army standing at a mere 1/3 of its considerable strength in the first Gulf War, speed was indeed to prove lethal (Hahn, 2015, Ricks, 2006, p. 135).

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[14] As Robert Kagan remarked, America was genuinely disappointed when only 38 states joined its military endeavour in Iraq (2012, p. 55).

[15] Given the outspoken support from many European countries – epitomized by, first and foremost, Letter of Eight – at governmental, if not public, level, the very logic behind this idea does not hold.

In less than three weeks Saddam's resilient regime, weathering away more than two decades of internal, regional as well as international turbulences, lay in tatters. Bagdad fell on April 7 with a total cost of 139 U.S. and 33 British casualties (Hahn, 2015). One of the most memorable moments of the entire Iraqi military campaign came two days later, when the statue of Saddam Hussein in downtown Bagdad was torn down, which also marked perhaps the second highest point in Bush's popularity as president with a whopping 77% approval rate being second only to stunning 92% shortly after 9/11 (Ricks, 2006, p. 134). For general Franks, though, the senior U.S. commander in the war, the mission could not have been further from being accomplished. In a classical Clausewitzian manner, it is of crucial importance to examine the nature of the war one is waging and hoping to win. Capturing a country's capital, however impressive it may sound and no matter how much bravado and chest-beating it enables back home, may not in itself translate into achieving an overall strategic victory or fostering a secure environment allowing for a peaceful transition; a regime change (Ricks, 2006, p. 135). As the invasion force triumphed, Iraqis across the entire country rose up and unleashed their long-suppressed hatred for Saddam's regime in an extraordinary wave of vandalism and looting.

Donald Rumsfeld, exhibiting Jeffersonian rhetoric akin to downplaying the significance of the blood-shed following the French Revolution, appeared unconcerned. However, to pacify a conquered, however imperfectly, country, the victor needs to show deep interest, act decisively and resolutely as well as give off a sense of effectiveness. Unfortunately, tepid goodwill extended to Americans by Iraqis would slowly evaporate with every single day during which anarchy ruled and order was nowhere in sight (Ricks, 2006, p. 144). Even Robert Kagan (2012, p. 35) was swift to remark that Americans, "[…]*having helped topple dictators in the Middle East, are not sure how they feel about what may follow*." When one wishes to win the hearts and minds of a nation held under an iron fist of a dictator for too long, simply overthrowing him or her proves largely insufficient, potentially disastrous.

Concomitant with inadequate troop numbers and lack of post-Bagdad planning, the occupation force found itself stretched way too thin to restore electricity, access to water or, generally speaking, gradually improve the lives of ordinary Iraqis (Ricks, 2006, p. 146). Furthermore, Sunni towns of Ramadi and Fallujah[16] – home to approximately

[16] The several major battles held there – the largest since at least Operation Desert Storm – serve to testify how modern technology in tandem with advanced strategy and planning can overcome even the most difficult of urban warfare in a geographically challenging region.

40 000 Baathist Party[17] operatives – would soon rise to prominence as major places of unrest. Judging in retrospect, many believe that disbanding the Iraqi Army – perhaps the last remaining vestige of legitimacy, i.e. a unifying element, in the country – effectively dissolving the Iraqi government its Baathist Party members from participating in the ensuing governmental re-organization were two key blunders, the latter of which was the ill-doing of Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority, capturing[18] the first year of the invasion in a snapshot (Hahn, 2015, Newsbasic 2010). Alienating those who had shown no loyalty to Hussein by making them unemployed exacerbated the already vulnerable and unstable situation considerably; a situation that led to widespread uprisings erupting across the country in 2004.

But as Moktada Al-Sadr's[19] escalating insurgency made Iraq come apart at the seams, U.S. policy also began to shift thanks to gen. Casey's concerted efforts that brought military and civilian activities much closer (Ricks, 2006, pp. 391–392). But apart from fledgling support by Iraqis and bar American public appalled and horrified by the Abu Ghraib prison scandal that made the headlines across the globe (DiPaolo, 2011, pp. 196–197, Newsbasic 2010),[20] the occupation force had another obstacle to struggle against: geography. In 1957 even Hans W. Weigert famously postulated that "*geography does not argue, it simply is* (Weigert, 1957, p. 5)." Or, as Spykman put it more eloquently: "[…] *Ministers come and go, even dictators die, but mountain ranges stand unperturbed* (Spykman, 1942, p. 41)."

Thus, U.S. endeavours were severely hindered by the hostile and unforgiving relief map teeming with swaths of desert that made transporting troops, supplies, equipment – logistics in general – extraordinarily difficult (Kaplan, 2012, p. 19, 36). In his insightfully refreshing manifesto *The Revenge of Geography* (2012), Kaplan argues that Iraq represent a devastating concoction of two American foreign policy paradigms – Munich and Vietnam; a harsh account drawing from naïve faith in appeasing a dictator linked to a foreign policy fiasco that cost the lives of many Americans without achieving the desired end result. Yet even as WMDs were nowhere to be found and with the insurgency wreaking havoc upon Iraqi soil, there was a glimpse of hope as Bremer, on

[17] Saddam's former ruling party (Ricks, 2006, p. 146).

[18] Saddam was found hiding in an underground hideout in December 2003 (Newsbasic, 2010).

[19] A Shiite cleric bitterly opposing the U.S.-led occupation.

[20] Epitomized by disturbing photographs revealing the abuse of Iraqi detainees by American soldiers in the eponymous prison. Even if it resulted in an overall better treatment henceforth, the main perpetrators escaped unscathed.

June 28, 2004, officially handed control of Iraq to Ayad Allawi, head of the new interim government (Ricks, 2006, p. 389), followed by the establishment of a 275-member Transitional National Assembly in January 2005 (Hahn, 2015, Stiglitz, 2007, p. 9).[21]

However, what appeared as a rather premature celebration in May 2003 when Bush, commander-in-chief, gave the now (in)famous "mission accomplished speech" declaring an end to major combat operations aboard U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln, would mere two years later sound profoundly short-sighted. As Iraqis, mostly Shiites,[22] were preoccupied flocking the first democratic elections in 50 years, at home Christopher Hitchens,[23] while promoting his new book titled *Thomas Jefferson* (2005) and attempting to make perhaps the last, and arguably the most compelling case for invading Iraq, ultimately failed to convince undeterred and well-versed Jon Stewart, himself an ardent opponent of the 2003 Iraq War, on his own show.[24] The quest to democratize Iraq nearly came to a halt in 2006[25] due to the intensified insurgency the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) of which accounted for nearly a third of total U.S. casualties (Hahn, 2015, Stiglitz, 2007, p. 15) in the 2003 – 2011 period.

The annual cost of rebuilding Iraq and fending off the overall disillusionment with the deteriorating security situation[26] kept soaring and nearly doubled to exceed 100 billion USD in 2006. According to governmental estimates verified and scrutinized by Stiglitz (2007), even as late as FY 2008 the expenditures for both Iraq and Afghanistan were projected to reach 16 billion USD per month; a sum equal to e.g. the annual budget of the

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[21] This very assembly set out to write a permanent constitution, in effect since December 2005, which transferred legislative power to the permanent Council of Representatives thus replacing Transitional National Assembly (Hahn, 2015).

[22] Whereas most Sunnis refused to vote (Newsbasics, 2010).

[23] A political commentator, contributor to Vanity Fair and an outspoken critic of religions.

[24] For the entire interview on *the Daily Show*, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gI3g3z36y8Q&index=1&list=FLhbXQZYEiEH_3czPf2Rfbkw. Hitchens identified four key conditions under which one is allowed to violate a state's sovereignty: 1. repeated aggression against neighbouring states, 2. genocide, 3. "fooling around" with the non-proliferation treaty, 4. harbouring gangsters and internationally wanted terrorists and further allured to the 1998 legislation calling for the removal of Saddam's regime. He even went as far as to employ the term "Islamic caliphate" in connection with Bin Laden's vision of the Middle East.

[25] The year Nouri-al-Maliki becomes Prime Minister of Iraq and also Saddam Hussein is executed and subsequently disfigured in a very ostentatious way (Newsbasics, 2010) mirroring what the author alluded to with his remarks about rhetorical similarities between Thomas Jefferson and Defence Secretary Rumsfeld.

[26] The military e.g. resorted to offering meaningful monetary incentives for returning soldiers, as well as providing luxurious amenities at various bases across Iraq (Ricks, 2006, pp. 155–157).

UN (p. 11). As domestic opposition to the Iraq War – driven mostly by mounting U.S. casualties and the seemingly vicious cycle without any end in sight – grew louder and more consonant,[27] so too did the nature of U.S.-led efforts in Iraq steadily shifted from Powell's "overwhelming firepower" to restrain and goodwill initiatives meant for (re-)gaining the trust of the locals (Hahn, 2015).

However, instead of heeding the pleas of congressional leaders calling for a prompt demilitarization of U.S. efforts in Iraq, President Bush's strategic initiative, that has become known as the "surge", authorizes the dispatch of some 30 000 additional troops to bolster Gen. Petraeus'[28] urgent request for more freshmen to remove the insurgency from controlling multiple chokepoints throughout the country (Newsbasic, 2010). The 2007 Brookings Iraq Index clearly showed how much worse off the lives of ordinary Iraqis turned out to be than in the years leading to *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. With ¼ of Iraqi children suffering from chronic malnutrition, thousands of households without access to sewer systems or electricity and high-skilled labour force on the run (Iraq Index, 2007),[29] it does make one wonder whether those eagerly "planting a seed of democracy" in a country held together only under an iron grip, or knocking off Saddam's regime because it was, in the words of Rumsfeld, "*doable*"[30] foresaw any of this; this spiralling chain of consequences.

The "surge," though, did seem to, at long last, make a difference as U.S. forces skilfully employed diplomacy, persuasion as well as financial aid[31] to rally multiple factions inside Iraq to help counter the insurgency reinforced by a violent group calling itself "Al-Qaeda in Iraq[32]" in their backlash known as Sunni Awakening (Newsbasic, 2010, Hahn, 2015). Forcing the insurgency on the defensive, in 2008 the surge succeeded in bringing much-needed stabilization and relief after several years of relatively heated combat operations. Consistent with the *Status of Forces Agreement* signed by President

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[27] Evinced by Democrats capturing majorities in the Senate as well as the House of Representatives in the 2006 mid-term elections, not to mention the faltering public support in a steady decline since at least 2004 (Hahn, 2015).

[28] Commanding General of the Multi-National Force in Iraq between 2007–2008 (Newsbasic, 2010).

[29] Available at: http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Centers/saban/iraq-index/index20071221.PDF.

[30] Ahmad, 2014, p. 129.

[31] Even a country as distant and detached as Japan made valuable contributions to reconstructing Iraq. For more, see author's article: *Japanese Development Assistance: Charting a new course?*

[32] Which rebranded itself the Islamic State in Iraq as early as 2006. (Helfont and Brill, 2016).

Bush in 2008, President Obama pledged to withdraw all U.S. combat forces from Iraq by December 31, 2011 (Newsbasics, 2010, Hahn, 2015).[33]

Yet with sectarian violence reaching new heights and Prime Minister Nouri-Al-Maliki's bid to clamp down on Sunni legislators – in doing so further eroding the already precarious democratic foundations – since the departure of U.S. forces, it made even Thomas Friedman ask: *"Was Iraq the way Iraq was because Saddam was the way Saddam was, or was Saddam the way Saddam was because Iraq is the way Iraq is – a collection of sects and tribes unable to live together except under and iron fist.* […]*Can the Arab world develop pluralistic, consensual politics* […] *where people can live as Citizen and not feel that their tribe, sect or party has to rule or die?* (Friedman, 2011)*"* Then came ISIS.

Some would even argue that Hussein's regime laid the groundwork for the consequent rather than subsequent rise of the Islamic State, however, Helfont and Brill (2016) were quick to debunk these dangerously misleading assumptions and instead invoked Saddam's outspoken aversion to any form of Islamization of his regime evinced by e.g. his 1996 speech. If anything, the ruling Baathist Party called for Arab unity in the lieu of accommodating proclivities or even sympathies for Islamism, Wahhabism or Salafism. Furthermore, the loyalty of former Baathist Party members has been fairly volatile since 2003 and so their allegiance kept shifting to follow insurgent groups they deemed successful enough to take power (Helfont and Brill, 2016).

One should also not overestimate the alleged religious undertone of Saddam's support for foreign Islamist groups – such as Hamas or the Egyptian Islamic Jihad – which, in practice, was more often than not motivated *strategically* by Hussein's secular regime. Thus, ISIS is perhaps best understood as "[…]*a symptom of a broken state and broken political system that emerged since 2003* (Helfont and Brill, 2016)" further fuelled by former Prime Minister Maliki's pointed sectarian message that seeks to put the blame on the whole Sunni section of Iraqi society. With Iraq and Syria in shambles wrought upon by ISIS and Iran's increasing political involvement in Iraq's domestic policies, even the remaining Republican presidential hopefuls vying to succeed President Obama almost unanimously agreed that venturing into Iraq was a mistake dearly paid for.[34]

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[33] In fact, around 50 000 troops remained in Iraq from August 2010 until December 2011 to advise and train Iraqi security forces as well as help them gather intelligence (Newsbasic, 2010); a move in line with President Obama's philosophy ceding responsibility for Iraq's future to the Iraqi people (Hahn, 2015).

[34] Or to phrase it in their terms: "*Knowing then what we know now, would you have gone to Iraq?"* Particularly notable was the u-turn former candidate Jeb Bush made to address this foreign policy issues. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rW48yryodh0. Entertainingly enough, Governor Bush

After having established the extent of the 2003 Iraq War, its highs as well as lows and, in general, its legacy that still looms large over America, let us now turn our attention to popular geopolitics to explore and understand how comic books, movies, popular music and videogames engaged with the Iraq War.

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and many Republicans alike rarely forget to blame President Obama's policies when they themselves are questioned.

3. Popular geopolitics – bridging world politics and popular culture

Traditional geopolitics – unequivocally associated with e.g. Kjellén, Mackinder, Haushofer, Spykman, Cohen or other towering and influential individuals throughout the 20th century concerned with the big picture and grand, all-explaining theories – was steadily subject to much criticism from the 1980s onwards due to its perceived reductionism, elitism and state-centrism (Dittmer, Gray, 2010, p. 1664). Therefore, to counteract this very incompleteness of geopolitics devoid of everyday discourse and practises occurring outside of academic or policymaking fields, critical geopolitics emerged as a welcome approach, rather than a coherent theoretical framework, to questioning geographic assumptions about global politics while paying much focus to everyday discoursive practises and how those geopolitical projections are constructed (Dittmer, 2010, p. 10, Tuathail, 1996, pp. 52–53).

In order to better serve the critical geopoliticians' needs to engage with everyday production of geopolitical assertions, a subset of popular geopolitics was conceived of so as to, first and foremost, scrutinize the media and the dissemination of information in virtually all its forms. For in a democracy it is generally believed one cannot go to war – even when built on fabricated evidence – without popular consent as evinced by the resounding support both Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) garnered (Dittmer, 2010, pp. 14–15).

As early as 1996 Tuathail in his seminal book *Critical Geopolitics* postulated a tri-partite scheme identifying formal geopolitics – connected with academics and think tanks that formulate a geopolitical discourse knit into governmental decision making, practical geopolitics – linked to policy makers' and politicians' rhetorical framing of issues identified by formal geopolitics,[35] and popular geopolitics seeking to examine how our world is geopolitically mediated on a day-to-day basis and how one can make sense of it (Dittmer, 2010, p. 16, Dittmer, Gray, p. 1666, Dalby, 2008, pp. 4–5).

Accompanying critical geopolitics on her windy journey to gradually gain more credibility, prominence and consolidate itself as a legitimate academic field, have been many bold geographers (Sharp (2000), Tuathail (2005), Dittmer (2007), Dodds (2010), Power (2007)) who sought to lay theoretical as well as methodological cornerstones for popular geopolitics mostly tracing the way in which popular media reinforce elite discourses (Dittmer, Gray, 2010, p. 1665). Ranging from magazines, movies, news stations, over music and comic books, to videogames and the Internet, popular

[35] In this regard, President Bush's proclamation of an "axis of evil" we hinted at in the first chapter stands out as a relatively recent example of practical geopolitical rhetoric.

geopoliticians have ventured into various kinds of popular culture platforms (Hostýnek, 2014, pp. 29–31). Yet concentrating almost exclusively on elite geopolitical representations via isolated textual deconstruction, rather than Derridean con-textuality and everyday practices and performances, soon proved to be at odds with the complex and contested adjective "popular" itself.

Popular culture, unlike high culture – distinguished by its connection to cultural elites, or folk culture – limited to a specific, oftentimes backward, place (Dittmer, 2010, pp. 24–25), is perhaps best defined as having an all-encompassing mass appeal and mainstream characteristics that endeavour to tap into one's (or one country's) identity in an intertwined, two-way relationship between producers and consumers. And so to better tackle the ubiquitous, everyday geopolitical experience, Dittmer and Gray (2010) argued for a theoretical and methodological enrichment drawing from e.g. feminist geopolitics, non-representational theory and audience studies, the intersection of which might provide the much-needed insights from related fields and, in general, bring additional qualitative methods as well as theoretical broadening that would allow for renewing the fascinating field of popular geopolitics.

Aiding popular geopoliticians in their quest to uncover geopolitical imagination has been a sub-discipline of international relations dubbed popular culture and world politics – the PCWP nexus – which has, for the first time, been brought together with popular geopolitics in Caso's and Hamilton's sagacious book *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (2015). Thus, many contemporary authors highlighting representational logics, affect and emotions, intertextuality and insights from visual ethnography and security studies (Dodds, 2015, pp. 51–63), employ this prism to embark upon exploring the global war on terror, soft power, peacetime or wartime propaganda, global economy and many other areas belonging to both international relations and geopolitics. As such, the aforementioned publication offers a unique convergence of two mutually supportive fields in providing relevance, coherence and clarity to the study of the "popular" in our world.

Drawing from such a swath of analytical tools, the author then hopes to put "the best of both worlds" to a good use in the following chapters dealing with the portrayal of the 2003 Iraq War through the prism of comic books (cartoons), movies, popular music and videogames.

3.1 Comic books and the 2003 Iraq War – the 9/11 ethos vaporizes?

"The Beast has many heads, and on its heads are written names: Lockheed, Bell, Monsanto, Dow, Grumman, Colt and many others. […] A war for war's sake, usually. And one that could have been avoided." Garth Ennis, *Born #4*

Akin to movies, TV shows or music, throughout the past 60 years comic books, too, became a platform, a more socially conscious forum that allowed especially younger audience to engage with adult ideas as evinced by *Spider-man* dealing with drug-addicted Vietnam War veterans as early as 1964 (Scott, 2011, p. 200).

Yet until 9/11 comic books remained largely apolitical – with a brief intermezzo at the behest of Joe Sacco's *Palestine* or *Safe Zone Gorazde,* which however enjoyed comparatively smaller sales to fans' favourite *X-men, Superman* or other superheroes the stories of which were devoid of political activism or combat realism (Scott, 2011, p. 201). As much as one should not overestimate the fashionable catchphrase "*9/11 changed everything*", comic books – usually created and printed months in advance – suddenly had to cope with a new reality in which the battlefield was merged with the home front. In short, 9/11 brought war home (Scott, 2011, p. 203). This inability to continue comic book storylines as if nothing happened made e.g. the creators[36] of *Captain America* go back to the drawing board and tie the events of 9/11 into its story arc.[37]

Invoking the legacy of Pearl Harbour, many comic books sought to tap into the omnipresent sentiment of patriotism and retribution while at the same time warned on lumping together all Muslims and Arabs as terrorists, a distinction mirrored by the Bush administration as well (Scott, 2011, p. 229). Nevertheless, this seeming popular unity manifested in the "sky-high" approval rating of the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11 was soon to be replaced by political cynicism in the build-up to the Iraq War. Similarly, *411* and *Johnny Jihad* represent rare examples of cautionary tales questioning hawkish mentality as the war drums were already gathering momentum for the invasion (Scott, 2011, p. 228).

In an extraordinarily rigorous work focusing on American cartoonists – modest "cousins" of their comic books peers – Saleh analyzed four types of newspapers (*Newsweek, The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times*) in years 2003 and 2007 to identify some common themes, motives, symbols and a rather shared approach that cartoonists employed in addressing the 2003 Iraq War (Saleh, 2007, pp. 1–

[36] John Ney Reiber and John Cassaday.

[37] Hostýnek, 2014, Popular geopolitice in the USA, PP. Dittmer (2010)., PP?.

69, Luce, 2005, p. 30). Ranging from depicting Bush as a cowboy, a French maid eating freedom fries, over portraying Saddam as a crazy taxi driver and to e.g. Rumsfeld as a car mechanic, political cartoonists made numerous iconic popular culture references[38] to humorously tackle even the most serious of concerns – such as swelling U.S. casualties, deteriorating Iraqi armed forces, suffering of ordinary Iraqis, toppling Saddam's statue in Bagdad, uncovering the abuses at Abu Ghraib and failing to find any evidence for WMDs or subsidizing 9/11 (Saleh, 2007, pp. 34–37, 53–55).

Being overwhelmingly unsupportive of the invasion and given the relatively limited space in newspapers that cartoonists had to fit their ideas into, they oftentimes resorted to using exaggerations, metaphors and similes to convey condensed messages that served as outspoken criticism of the Bush administration in a surprisingly effective attempt to influence public opinion (Luce, 2005, pp. 29–30).[39] It is thus reasonable to assume that in tandem with growing disillusionment over the Bush administration's mishandling and misconduct of the invasion as well as the post-war reconstruction, political cartoons helped reinforce the negative message pouring in from abroad, made it resonate among its eager audience and had a role to play in shifting public opinion (Luce, 2005, p. 30).

Aiding them in raising awareness about the fallacious characteristics of the Iraq War were not mere rhetorical aspects and meanings, hinted at above, embedded within the cartoons per se, but also to a great extent nonverbal ones (Luce, 2005, p. 31) – visual elements. Granted, the colourful world of cinematography offers more variegated ways of setting the mood of a particular movie via visual components – lights, ambience, camera angles, zoom, etc., and stylization (or lack thereof) in general, but even many comic books released from 2003 onwards can boast a highly stylized tone and atmosphere.

It is precisely this lamentable absence of focus on the visual aspects of products of popular geopolitics – being almost exclusively analyzed through the scope of textuality only – that Kiersey and Neumann (2015), Dittmer and Dodds (2008) as well as Dittmer and Gray (2010) identified as a current analytical bottleneck of popular geopolitics or the PCWP nexus.

Furthermore, despite being relatively unconstrained in their creativity and imagination, those drawing the comic books – same as directing a movie, writing a song or creating a videogame – must always take into account profitability of their works. Push

[38] To *Top Gun*, *the Wonderful Wizard of Oz* fairytale or to Noah's ark.

[39] A 2004 poll conducted by ABC News witnessed 52% Americans believe that the Iraq War was not worth fighting for (Luce, 2005, p. 30).

the envelope too far and the sales might turn out to be underwhelming global acclaim notwithstanding, yet giving explicit kudos to a particular agenda or ideology poses the risks of governmental instrumentality. Thus, the creators of popular culture artefacts usually balance between those two extremes in search of a target audience or a dedicated fan base on an increasingly saturated market.

Whereas comic books released shortly after 9/11 featured often very contrastive colours to convey a meaning of tragedy, as seen in *The Amazing Spider-man #36* or *Captain* America *#1 What Price Glory* (Scott, 2011, pp. 203–204, Dittmer, 2010, pp. 85–87), comic book authors using the Iraq War as a backdrop for their stories chose to follow a rather different course. Joe Sacco drew his *Complacency Kills* – a gripping portrayal of heavily wounded soldiers – entirely in black and white so as to heighten the enveloping and gritty psychological realism. In a similar vein, Sacco's *Trauma on Loan* – paralleling the horrific abuses at the Abu Ghraib Prison – and Brian K. Vaughn's riveting fable *Pride of Baghdad* – offering a thought-provoking animal's view about post-war Iraq[40] – both served as a reminder of the profound uncertainties surrounding post-Saddam Iraq (Scott, 2011, p. 236).

Tom Waltz's *Finding Peace* stands out from other graphic novels thanks to its sepia tones resembling a battlefield sketchbook and giving off an air of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that thousands of soldiers are to bear the brunt of. While some authors chose to revisit a familiar, World War II territory albeit with a greater emphasis on realism thus mirroring the spoils of the Iraq War as evinced by Garth Evans's *Fury: Peacemaker* (2006), the Marvel Comics behemoth undertook an ambitious task of injecting the storyline of its 2007 *Civil War* comic with moral issues tackling head on the price of security on the one hand, and civil rights on the other. In a remarkable display of boldness, Marvel sought to address the Patriot Act and the GWOT in general, by letting two superhero teams led by fans' favourite Captain America and Iron Man clash over the Superhero Registration Act[41] with far-reaching implications for the Marvel universe (Marvel Comics: 2006 – 2007).

[40] An explicit call-back to the inadvertent American bombing of a zoo in Baghdad as well as to Saddam's family's beloved pets – lions (Scott, 2011, p. 236).

[41] A bill imposing restrictions on superheroes, subjecting them under governmental control and to the rule of law (Scott, 2011, p. 256). This also happens to lie at the heart of the upcoming *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) movie.

The eponymous producer also released a well received[42] series, designed for the actual troops to enjoy, titled *The New Avengers: Pot of Gold* and *Letters Home*[43] incorporating superheroes into military scenarios. Their popularity overseas was indeed hardly surprising given that many serving soldiers were in their late teens or early twenties (Scott, 2011, p. 262). Let us now explore one particular comic book in more detail in order to identify and better demonstrate the key rhetorical, narrative as well as visual tools mentioned in this chapter.

3.2 Case study: Combat Zone: True Tales of GIs in Iraq

Karl Zinsmeister's *Combat Zone* released as a one-volume trade paperback in 2004 offers a rather formulaic storyline, yet wrapped in a fairly captivating narrative that aims to bridge the gap between reporting on issues in the field and the popular graphic novel format (Scott, 2011, p. 232). Drawing from his real-life account of combat – after all, Zinsmeister spend a month with the 82nd Airborne in Iraq – he seeks to convey a sense of up-close realism abounding with everyday details teamed up with meticulous military planning; features commonly associated with comic books tackling the Iraq War.

Another prominent feature of *Combat Zone* – the role of religious faith in the face of deceased enemy combatants – sounds a distinctly familiar bell to both readers and moviegoers resonating even further given the Christian undertone of Bush administration's foreign policy undertakings. Even if Zinsmeister relies perhaps too heavily on familiar clichés about American forces as liberators, bound by honour, freeing the oppressed people(s),[44] artistically this very comic book stands out and merits our attention as well.

While falling short of expectations in terms of the actual sales, the author did concoct a surprisingly powerful mixture that depicts the Iraqi invasion as a venerable quest devoid of any false premises, ambiguities or exaggerated claims and in so doing, unlike the vast majority of other comic books portraying either implicitly or explicitly the Iraq War, pays a lip service to the government. The comic features a racially and ethnically diverse cast of colourful characters (Pvt. Kulzinski, Pvt. Dean, Pvt. Brown, Sgt. Wayne and so on) who, in order to complete a mission or overcome a challenge, need to work closely together and rely on one another's strengths (Zinsmeister, 2004). Given the

[42] A run of around 300 000 copies (Scott, 2011, p. 260).

[43] With over one million copies in circulation (Scott, 2011, p. 261).

[44] Akin to WWII comic books.

Polish involvement in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the inclusion of Pvt. Kulzinski, an Eastern European, aims to do justice to those Central and Eastern European countries that sided with President Bush in what became known as the "*Letter of Eight* (Ash, 2004)."

Furthermore, while making a clear demarcation between American moral superiority and the dishonourable, brutal and dehumanized ways of warfare conducted by the enemy, *Combat Zone* quite successfully manages to include various light-hearted moments usually preceding or following combat encounters. Thus, while oftentimes facing mortal danger from, first and foremost, SCUD missiles, IEDs, armoured vehicles and insurgents hiding among, or pretending to be, civilians (Zinsmeister, 2004), the cast of characters never misses a chance to engage in small-talk about their homes, families, loved ones or food.

All this makes the protagonists easily relatable, humanized, likable, yet resolute, emotionless and relentless when facing enemies. This air of togetherness and friendliness among one another that lends the main heroes an aura of moral high ground in stark contrast to mercilessness toward foes "playing dirty" again very closely parallels the Bush administration's rhetoric as well as a common theme shared among other types of popular media too.

Much to my surprise, Zinsmeister's characters have also been endowed with much eloquence and linguistic skilfulness without resorting to curse words or taboos. Granted, the presence of standard military jargon and slang is heavily felt during combat scenes (Zinsmeister, 2004), yet when the moments of calmness settle in, most characters, all men in their 20s or early 30s, show decent command of the English language and appear anything but dim-witted.

Ultimately, though, we opted for *Combat Zone* thanks to its remarkably convincing visual qualities. Through the use of sepia tones, grainy and gritty images, close-up shots and emphasis on tangible visuals rather than the readers' imagination, the author comes as close to capturing the reality on the Iraqi soil as possible considering the graphical limitations of the comic book genre. Especially thanks to the close-up shots the reader is able to quite accurately decipher character's emotions and feelings even during intense combat. Furthermore, as mentioned above, Zinsmeister's own manifold combat-related experiences envelop *Combat Zone* in an air of overall trustworthiness grounded in reality.

As the story progresses, the cast of characters keeps dwindling and every death of a fellow "brother in arms" is mourned, remembered and vindicated in the long run. The plot culminates in chapter five, titled "*Hard Victory*", which, in the author's opinion, closely ties to urban battles against insurgents in Fallujah throughout 2004 and 2005.

Entering an unnamed town, the remaining protagonists struggle against all the perks and perils of urban warfare showcasing door-to-door tactics of clearing buildings in practice, the enemies' resourcefulness and desecration of cultural sites, Iraqi civilians being saved by Americans, further sacrifices and, while scarred and scathed, emerging triumphantly. All those features were prominently on display when sieging Fallujah. In an emotional moment, Sgt. Kirkwood, in tears, states: "[…]*Kulzinski went out with his boots on. He killed both of the terrorists who walked into that room, and then he saved every one of us in there, including innocent Iraqis.* […]*Go get some rest, we've still got a war to win…starting tomorrow*. (Zinsmeister, 2004)." If he only knew what was yet to follow…

To sum it up, both cartoons and comic books exhibited almost unequivocal criticism of the 2003 Iraq War, questioning, doubting and mocking all the justifications on the basis of which the Bush administration sold the war to the public and invaded Iraq. Yet those supportive of the Iraq War, while shying away from profoundly commenting (and understandably so) on the premises, still managed to produce worthy, down-to-earth popular culture artefacts rooted in authenticity, combat factuality and visual convincingness, which marks a considerable departure from the post-9/11 comics enmeshed in, most notably, patriotic sentiments.

3.3 Filming the 2003 Iraq War: popular geopolitics of movies

"It's funny how the colors of the real world only seem really real when you watch them on a screen." Anthony Burgess, A Clockwork Orange

Ever since the ground-breaking invention of celluloid, the black and white – and soon colourful – world of cinematography has been on the rise and continues flourishing as evinced by surging revenues of the movie industry as well as global attention ascribed to various film award occasions held on a regular basis. Precisely because of their skilfulness in capturing the hearts and minds of mass audiences around the globe, films have enjoyed a long, and undoubtedly fruitful, relationship with governments, which were swift to recognize and welcome movies as a powerful, compelling propaganda tool especially in wartime (Dodds, 2008, p. 1621). Westwell believes that World War II represents a case in point when it comes to the war movie genre functioning as governmental propaganda, justification and celebration of group heroism, self-sacrifice to higher and nobler goals as well as explicit appraisal of the competence of the military (2010, p. 19).

Even though the author himself (Hostýnek, 2014, p. 43) positioned the actual inception of the now inseparable link between the movie genre and the military industrial

entertainment complex[45] all the way to World War I, from a Czech perspective, one does indeed not need to venture far in order to witness how spectacular and appealing of an experience movie-going became in Nazi Germany under the auspices of Joseph Goebbels. Yet while depicting war as a 'progressive' activity defining conventional masculine identity remained relatively intact and unquestioned until the Vietnam War (Hostýnek, p. 44), a brief cycle of critical movies – *The Deer Hunter (*1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) was steadily emerging in hopes of escaping from the genre's core myths.

Nevertheless, such a brief intermezzo, which ultimately failed to divorce Pentagon from Hollywood, was soon quenched as the *Rambo* trilogy (1982 –1988), *Top Gun* (1986) and later *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) rose to prominence and in doing so seemingly restored credibility for war (Westwell, 2010, p. 20, Sturken, 1997, pp. 115–122). As Dodds (2015) astutely points out: "*In the past, presidents, such as ex-Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan, appeared to understand that Cold War geopolitics could be assembled and reproduced in filmic terms* (p. 52)." Dubbing his Strategic Defence Initiative 'star wars' and labelling the Soviet Union an 'evil empire' certainly helped make the case for a bid to bring Soviets to their heels in an era the audience of which was eagerly flocking the *Star Wars* movies.

Thus, this very intertextuality – a valuable feature when one analyzes popular culture artefacts as pointed out by Dodds (2015, p. 58) – revolving around a wider contextualization of pop-culture references understood in close relation to one another profoundly dovetails with post-9/11 America as well. With a romanticized view of soldiers fully blossoming even before the World Trade Center came down, one may assume that in the aftermath Americans fixated their gaze, perception of national strength and well-being on military preparedness calling for swift and decisive military action or solutions (Bacevich, 2005, p. 2); a sort of "shock and awe" mentality that American movie directors were happy to oblige.[46] As we have already noted, George W. Bush's primetime declaration of the end of major combat operations in Iraq[47] aboard an aircraft carrier made several scholars observe striking similarities between this premature celebration and a popular 1980s geopolitical flick – *Top Gun* (Dodds, 2008, p. 1621, Rich, 2007).

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[45] For a closer look, see James Der Derian's book published in 2009: *Critical Practices of International Relations: Selected Essays.*

[46] One only needs to bring up *World Trade Center* (2006) or *War of the Worlds* (2005).

[47] While standing in front of a banner reading: "mission accomplished."

But precisely because of their provision of space where commonsense ideas about global politics and history converge, condense and are (re)-produced, movies have also played a crucial role as a powerful vehicle for expressing dissent and contrastive points of view beyond the reach of the government.[48] Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) is one notable exception in the post-9/11 world of cinematography that deliberately sought to slander the Bush administration for underestimating the mounting threat in hopes of swaying the public away from Bush's 2004 re-election bid (Dodds, 2008, p. 1626).

While two particular types of movies – superhero films and action-thrillers – largely capitalizing on the visual imagery linked to urban destruction thus alluding to the events in New York rose to, and enjoyed, considerable popularity in the 9/11 aftermath (Dodds, 2015, pp. 55–56) the representational logics of such flicks conveyed a rather straightforward message about imminent or veiled dangers emanating from the Middle East. The 2008 – 2010 period saw the release of a significant portion of movies relating to America's current wars, such as *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Lions for Lambs* (2007), *Brothers* (2009) or *Green Zone* (2010).

However, given their release dates, these flicks had to adjust to and accommodate a more difficult, complex reality in which the jingoistic rhetoric of "mission accomplished" gave way to confronting the daunting reality of a strengthening insurgency in Iraq. In short, the war in Iraq was not going well and with the 9/11 air of patriotism gradually losing its steam, the abovementioned films chose to reflect and adapt to the grim reality of mounting casualties and the perpetual characteristics of fighting insurgents (Westwell, 2010, p. 22).

Interestingly enough, though, these recent war movies exhibit several similar features and uniting themes: while attracting some critical acclaim[49] all of them turned out to be major box office flops that failed to find a target audience in the US. Also, we may divide them into two distinguishable groups with one taking place on the home front and showing the difficulties of adjusting to post-combat life and the other exploring the experience(s) of Iraq-based combat soldiers (Westwell, 2010, p. 22) and also, very notably, the perils of PTSD. While not completely rigid and being partially permeable in terms of those two groups, the vast majority of films explore soldiers' journeys from the front-line to home front and sometimes back again.

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[48] To further reinforce the point about close ties between Pentagon and Hollywood, Dodds mentions the Beverly Hills meeting between film producers and governmental officials to debate how cinematography can contribute to the war on terror (Dodds, 2008, p. 1621).

[49] And even winning an Oscar as we shall soon explore.

Based on the premises of the aforementioned war genre flicks we may then deduce that even though it did take filmmakers, unlike comic book authors, considerably longer to become critical of the Iraq War while pushing the war movie genre to its absolute limits, contemporary American cinematography has, too, embraced the growing disillusionment with the once indomitable war narrative. Westwell as well as Dodds believe this marks a considerable departure for filmmakers, unseen since the Vietnam War (2008, pp. 1634–1635, 2010, p. 32), in the light of which even action thrillers showcase deep ambivalence and increasingly grey-shaded morality devoid of clear-cut demarcation rampant in the wake of 9/11.

Yet still, Michael J. Shapiro (2008, 2015) agrees that in order for a product, or in our case a popular culture artefact, to be consumed, processed, digested and made sense of, one needs to have a keen audience willing to engage in the actual consumption, or involvement in general. For without an audience, labelling a movie (or any popular culture artefact) "popular" sounds distantly far-fetched.

This has been the case with most movies critical of the Iraq War and so as to hint at a possible explanation for why audiences did not rush to see such bleak and complex flicks an instead gravitated towards more conventional ones, Westwell (2010) attributes this to what he calls the "New American Militarism" "*in which a constant state of war, and trickle of US casualties, is now considered an acceptable and necessary part of the status quo* (p. 34)." This again points to the current limitations of popular geopolitics that needs to delve deeper into audience studies to better understand how audience members themselves produce meanings, attribute significance to specific symbols etc., especially in the case of fans and their affect (Dodds and Gray, 2010, pp. 1669–1670, Dodds, 2015, p. 57). Because sometimes the constituent power and the immanent creative force of audience go much further beyond the original intentions of movie creators (Dodds and Gray, 2010, p. 1670) exemplified by amateur fan movies, online reviews and many other manifestations of the digital age we live in.

Let us now turn our attention to *Hurt Locker*, the arguably most commercially as well as critically successful movie so that we can "encounter the visual" in more detail and better demonstrate our findings thus far.

3.4 Hurt Locker – Seven Instances of Dismantling an Improvised Explosive Device

In an introductory part to his much acclaimed book title *Cinematic Geopolitics* (2008) Shapiro draws some very compelling parallels between *the Battle of Algiers*' (1966)[50]

[50] Winner of the Grand Prize at the Venice film festival.

depiction of French "interrogation" techniques in contrast to the torturous abuses at Abu Ghraib some forty years later. He then goes on to poignantly lament how the Pentagon's viewers employed the lessons learned from an anti-colonial struggle as a source of inspiration, rather than a disconcerting scenario (p. 3). Such a symbolic simile and narrative is indeed hard to miss, yet when encountering the visual, one is presented manifold additional challenges in reading moving pictures – unlike their static counterparts – emanating from the popular medium itself.

As MacDougall once entertainingly put it: " [Even] *anthropology has had no lack of interest in the visual; its problem has always been what to do with it.* (1997, p. 276)." For a human eye happens to be an imperfect tool through the retinas of which to see and perceive the outside world. Therefore, any analysis of a popular culture artefact containing both sonorous as well as visual aspects brings many relevant issues, e.g. camera angles, actors' performances, costumes, props, various filters and light effects, settings, etc. to the fore so as to corroborate a central narrative, a message. As such, merely looking through, looking at, and looking beyond – akin to reading photographs suggested by Wright (1999, p. 38) – proves largely insufficient. In a similar vein, Shapiro postulates that "*a focus on the aesthetic rather than the psychological subject places an emphasis on images rather than the film narrative, and turns the analysis of a film away from personal drama and toward the changing historico-political frame within which the drama takes place* (2008, p. 11)."

With that in mind, the following attempt at "reading" and interpreting *Hurt Locker* contextualized within the pitfalls of the Iraq War represents one among a myriad possible courses and strands of analytical prism that is open to debate. By no means does the author wish to impose his way of understanding as the sole lenses through which one is expected to make sense of the *mise-en-scène.* However, he does believe that a profound understanding of the filmmaker's intentions in tandem with a meticulous deconstruction of the overarching themes and motives of the movie perceived in a coalesced way rather than interpreted separately should allow us to extrapolate our findings against the everyday reality of the Iraq War.

Kathryn Bigelow's flick released in 2007 employs a rather different approach toward ticking bombs than what moviegoers have been used to spectating. Thus, instead of placing the ticking bomb at the heated climax of the movie, she, interestingly, opts for mirroring the way documentaries are shot so as to grasp the day-to-day experiences of a bomb-disposal unit while following daily routines of Staff Sergeant William James

portrayed by the fans' favourite Jeremy Renner.[51] Some would argue that *Hurt Locker*'s repetitive narrative structure emulates the overall aimlessness of the occupation, with no end in sight (Clover, 2009, p. 9). Given the movie's release date, there might indeed be some substance to such claims. Yet the author, akin to Westwell's compelling analysis (2010, pp. 22–26), favours a more positive undertone and instead suggests that James, an ordinary soldier with an extraordinary record at defusing bombs, serves to perhaps restore the viewers' faith in the credibility of the military while redeeming and vindicating his fallen brethren against increasingly higher stakes.[52]

The movie opens with a famous quotation uttered by American (war) journalist Chris Hedges: "*The rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug,*" accompanied by an increasingly dramatic, but ultimately indiscernible, audio track followed by a first-person documentary-like sequence of a remote-controlled vehicle. The mise-en-scène with a caption reading "Bagdad 2004" is further intensified through the usage of sonorous beats emulating heartbeats. When the original commander of the bomb disposal unit dies in an explosion activated remotely via a mobile phone, the stage is ready for William James to make an entrance. Not only did Bigelow manage to brilliantly capture the immediate danger of defusing bombs by opting for practical effects[53] and convincing settings,[54] but she also emphasises James as an ordinary, redemptive, albeit feisty and airheaded, hero via humanitarian impulses providing a moral imperative for each scenario the main protagonist(s) face.

Moreover, given that a handheld camera was used to shoot 90% of the scenes (Westwell, 2010, p. 26), Bigelow undoubtedly succeeded in bestowing a documentary "look" upon the entire movie which then abounds with seeming authenticity as well as persuasiveness. Being buttressed by this realistic feeling, the engaging and gripping atmosphere is further fuelled by actual military jargon employed during the Iraq War. Thus, expressions such as "Hajis"[55] or "humvee"[56] neatly fit into the overarching

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[51] Known, most notably, as Hawkeye from *the Avengers* movies.

[52] In one scene James is depicted defusing a bomb meant to destroy a UN building in an explicit callback to the bombing of UN Headquarters in Bagdad in August 2003 (Westwell, 2010, p. 23).

[53] That is, real explosions.

[54] After all, the movie was shot in Syria with Iraqi refugees cast as extras (Westwell, 2010, pp. 24).

[55] A slightly derogatory term used in connection with ordinary Iraqis.

[56] An abbreviation derived from pronouncing all the letters of HMMWV – a popular armoured vehicle dispatched by the US army in conflicts across the globe.

narrative interwoven with words, phrases and remarks uttered exactly when the audience would expect them to be pronounced, which adds another – linguistic and rhetorical – layer to an already rigorously shot flick.

In this regard, Austin's postulations about speech acts and the power of words that can sway the listeners one way or another (Austin, 2000) do seem to find fertile soil with, and "hit the mark" in, Bigelow's film. When it comes to filler scenes serving here as mere transitions between the individual bomb-disposal scenarios, the fairly narrow focus, on and a perspective of, a small team allows *Hurt Locker* to avoid debating the at best questionable underpinnings of the Iraq War altogether and instead shows us how soldiers may spend their free time – brawling, intoxicating themselves or playing videogames.[57] Homesickness is only mentioned in the passing and decontextualized much like the PTSD.

What Bigelow also does right, is generating subjectivity and eliciting a strong emotional attachment to the main protagonists in what many scholars call an affective relationship (Dodds, 2013, Dodds, 2015, p. 57).[58] Simply put, we, the audience, are moved by the everyday struggles of the main heroes wrestling with increasingly dire challenges. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek believes this emphasis on a continuous, redemptive cycle does not just aim at reducing intractable religious, ethnic or political conflict into something tangible and solvable, but is rather indicative of the entire movie genre as a whole. "*This choice is deeply symptomatic: although soldiers, they do not kill, but risk their lives dismantling terrorist bombs destined to kill civilians – can there be anything more sympathetic to our liberal eyes* (Žižek, 2010)?"

Halfway through the movie we are to bear witness to a penultimate scene during which fellow British combatants are under attack in a desert by nearby insurgent snipers. Hinting at the spoils and limits of fighting an insurgency, Bigelow chose to frantically change perspectives every few seconds so as to convey a sense of disorder and total befuddlement in doing so generating the abovementioned affect upon seeing our heroes prevail, albeit with casualties. One might even come to a conclusion that the coalition forces are portrayed as a "victim" caught in the ubiquitous messiness.

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[57] The author's favourite *Gears of War* (2006) – a third-person shooter about a dedicated group of marines saving Earth from the invasion of Locust, which ends with deploying a massive bomb to exterminate the impending threat – is quite emblematic of soldiers' preferences and was indeed a nice touch to see on the silver screen.

[58] What she may not have done so right is her portrayal of IEDs, which were primarily designed as roadblock explosives to impede the movement of vehicles rather than meant for inflicting civilian casualties (Taubin, 2009, pp. 30–35, Bradshaw, 2009).

Depicting ordinary Iraqis as sometimes smug, veiled and thus potentially harmful individuals, *Hurt Locker*'s narrative trope of *rescue* builds up to a climactic scene in which James fails to disarm his bomb no. 874 attached onto an Iraqi civilian whose genuine fear of death and the bleak prospects his family might face in case of a missing father merge to produce a powerful and moving exchange of mutual understanding, language barriers notwithstanding, which nevertheless ends on an explosive note.

What follows is a brief period of adjustment to life back home, a sort of "home front cycle" showing James, a returning soldier, cope with everyday activities, chores and sprawling consumerism alongside his loving family. But much like Vietnam War veterans even James ultimately cannot escape his traumatic, yet somehow thrilling and addictive experience from the war front as the final scene depicts him enlisting again and walking toward an unexploded device anew.[59]

All in all, we may then infer that *Hurt Locker*, while it does not make an explicit case for war *per se*, displays a strong tendency to vindicate the entire war movie genre nonetheless much to the critical acclaim as well as audience's positive reception. To return to Hedges' remarks, if war is indeed a drug, then *Hurt Locker* serves as a first dose to likely shake off the presence of much more critical, bleak anti-war flicks[60] and re-establish the now slightly amended credentials while striving to overcome the Iraq syndrome looming large over the once indomitable genre of war movies.

3.5 Popular music goes to war: Iraq as a new soundscape?

Societies change in wartime. One way or another, the war experience(s) resonate strongly among public struggling to adjust to a new reality as well as among those navigating the society, let alone the troops, through the stormy seas of military encounters, ensuing peacetime and beyond. As such, music, an intrinsically acoustic, sonic undertaking has often been there to accompany societies (Davies, 2015, p. 121) on their windy paths throughout documented history.

All the way from the revolutionary drums keeping the morale up during the War of Independence, to emotional musical pleas calling for compassion performed in the aftermath of 9/11, American popular music provides a welcome, powerful window on

[59] One might argue that it was a dream sequence exploring an earlier confession to his son about him being really good an only one thing, but the author leans toward a simpler interpretation.

[60] which in the overwhelming majority of cases failed to attract audience's attention and yielded much smaller revenues in comparison to *Hurt Locker*. Granted, even *Hurt Locker* with its mediocre profit of 55 million dollars lies miles ahead from being considered a blockbuster (Westwell, 2010, p. 34).

national politics through which one may have an easier time understanding, and making sense of, shifting societal values (Garofalo, 2007, p. 3, Hostýnek, 2015, p. 4). Be it Tin Pan Alley producers taking both WWI and WWII charts by storm with songs titled "*It's time for every boy to be a soldier* (1916)" or "*The White Cliffs of Dover* (1942)," or rock and roll's spirit of rebellion during the Vietnam War era of social revolt, music, in general, represents a powerful vehicle for expressing any kind of opinion or making a statement in a catchy, occasionally even shocking, way as exemplified by the *Pussy Riot* case (Davies, 2015, p. 125).

Yet given how variegated and complex contemporary music has come to be – with its manifold encoded allegories, poems, metaphors dormant beneath the glossy lyrical surface – it presents musicologists and scholars alike numerous analytical challenges to grapple with; challenges that a decade in since the much-acclaimed release of *Resounding International Relations* (2005) appear clearer, yet still unresolved. For not only do we need to venture beyond the mere extraction of meanings from lyrics and the either manifest or latent content, but, in Davies' words, we should also critically assess and embrace "[…] *how sound has physical and emotional properties* […], *how bodies emulate and absorb polyrhythms,* […] *how music articulates and disarticulates multidimensional relationships and experiences such as citizenship, high versus low culture, western tonalities and cultural conventions* (p. 129)."

Furthermore, the categories of those consuming music and fighting the actual wars *do* often intersect as we have already pointed out in the case of various comic books being published solely for the purpose of soldiers' entertainment, much like the US combatants bearing the brunt of the Vietnam War enjoyed tuning popular songs on the radio (Tomlinson, 2010, pp. 16–20). Add this to the fact that troops of various nationalities stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq were sometimes performed for on the front lines; an exciting and undoubtedly memorable experience many artists showing support to *soldiers*, rather than the *political leadership* per se, labelled "fun" and "thrilling" (Gehrmann, 2014, pp. 136–139).

Instead of elaborating on songs the lyrics and musical composition of which teem with ambiguity and the likelihood of excessive subjectivity, the author then wishes to delve into more audible sonic responses that of which understanding, deciphering and contextualization allow for easier interpretation in line with the overall aim of this thesis. And so, with the abovementioned limitations of the current academic corpus on music in mind, let us now turn our attention to musical responses to the Iraq War in hopes of uncovering uniting themes, underlining motives and some common ground that could serve as a cornerstone for future concluding remarks about not just popular music, but

comic books, movies and videogames too. Shevory (2008, pp. 3–4) was swift to reckon that determining what constitutes an actual response to the 2003 Iraq endeavour is, at best, a strenuously tricky task, not only because the Iraq War has not exactly been a discrete political event, but also given the proximity of 9/11 some popular songs released in response might be lumped together with the strand of anti-Iraq music.[61]

Moreover, several anti-war albums do seem to be largely unrelated to the entire Iraqi spectacle, such as a benefit album titled *Peace Songs: A Benefit to Help Children Affected by War* (Shevory, 2008, p. 3). In a similar vein, two volumes under the collective name of *Rock against Bush* do reference Bush's foreign political whimsies, most explicitly throughout an explicitly anti-Iraq War song "*Baghdad*" (Shevory, 2008, p. 4). In tandem with broad-based Win Without War coalition, many acclaimed musicians – Bruce Springsteen, Sheryl Crowe etc. – dissatisfied with the impending invasion of Iraq joined forces to express considerable antiwar sentiments culminating in the "*Rock for Change Tour*" the aim of which was to prevent Bush's re-election bid in 2004 and endorse the Kerry/Edwards ticket (Garofalo, 2007, p. 23).

The musical genres most critical of the Iraq War, and the Bush administration in general, range from rock – such as Grammy-winning band *Green Day* with their remarkably successful album "*American Idiot*" in which the Bush administration was held responsible for instilling paranoia and pushing a redneck agenda (Tomlinson, 2010, p. 18, Hostýnek, 2015, p. 28) over *Public Enemy*'s ferociously incendiary "*Son of a Bush*" to Michael Franti's upbeat reggae and rap song "*We Don't Stop*" with downright condescending lines "*Bush war 1, Bush war 2, they gotta a war for me, they gotta a war for you!*(Shevory, 2008, p. 12)."

On the other hand, country music remained overwhelmingly supportive of the government; a feature many were swift to attribute to its Jacksonian origins (Mead, 2006, p. 15) with one notable exception the author intends to elaborate upon later. Yet despite occasional commercial success of artists outspokenly critical about the Iraq War and the Bush administration's mishandlings, Garofalo's catchphrase "*real patriots do not dissent*" (2010, p. 17) serves to remind us that mainstream established artists – Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake etc. – fell in line with and attuned to the hawkish mood of the Bush administration (Garofalo, 2010, p. 15).

Furthermore, counter-narrative, anti-war music has had a hard time making it to the airwaves given the large-scale consolidation of the entire music industry in America

[61] Much like the Bush administration's eager conflation of the alleged threat Iraq posed to national security with a fabricated link to 9/11.

ever since the bipartisan, but tremendously controversial, 1996 Telecommunication Act, which, simply put, resulted in a few privileged corporations having the vast majority of the music industry under their wraps (Garofalo, 2010, p. 14). This very theme of widespread consolidation was mirrored globally too, because these days roughly 80% of all global music sales belong to Sony, Universal-Vivendi, AOL Time Warner, EMI or BMG (Goniprov, 2009, p. 15, Hostýnek, 2015, p. 30). It then comes as no shocking revelation that the music establishment "plays" it safe and favours commercially rentable projects instead of investing effort, money and airtime into risky antiwar gambits. The author himself opined that *"[…] profit-oriented businessmen aim for the lowest common denominator, which in turn does not leave much space for protest music in the lieu of favouring the status quo.* (Hostýnek, 2015, p. 30)."

Acting in their own enlightened self interest and making tremendous revenues via churning out music of sometimes dubious quality, why then should modern record companies cater to a protest music audience instead of sitting on the bonanza of a few selected global superstars? In such a simplified musical climate of political stifling, antiwar music was further eroded and undermined by another societal phenomenon – the absence of a military draft; itself a powerful, galvanizing force of social unrests throughout the 1960s (Goniprow, 2007, p. 12). And so what helped mobilize a social movement against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, and in doing so popularized antiwar music, has been conspicuously absent in the case of the 2003 Iraq War; an occasion which may very well still render protest songs purposeful, yet ultimately functionless, dissonant, isolated and, perhaps most of all, detached from the very audience it was once so fiercely rallying and uniting against the spoils of the Vietnam War.

For today's youths and their gradually declining attention span heightened by irresistible proclivities toward music videos published on online websites – and recording companies alike – protest music, while being relatively alive and well, seems to have become a mere label (Goniprow, 2007, pp. 16–18), an additional facet rather than means of stemming the tide. Let us now devote the following case study to the enthralling phenomenon of *Dixie Chicks*, their catchy and award-winning country music as well as their Iraq War-related "controversy" the geopolitical dimension of which will attest to our and contemporary PCWP nexus scholars' postulations about the need to venture beyond the textual analysis and confinements of a song's lyrics in order to synergize a more profound understanding about popular music as a whole.

3.6 The Curious Case of *Dixie Chicks*: "Not Ready to Make Nice?"

Even though the Bush administration was very careful from the outset of GWOT not to employ any religious undertone in making the case for invading both Afghanistan and Iraq[62] – much like avoiding casting the ensuing military endeavours as directed against civilians in both countries – various country music artists were swift to embrace the unfolding notion of "regions of danger" stemming from the Huntingtonian framing of "us and them" (Boulton, 2008, p. 375).

Invoking a geographically distant, yet somehow pressingly imminent, threat provided country music – a hallmark of southern values rooted in Jacksonian culture (Mead, 1999, p. 19) – a welcome topic over which to ponder. Jacksonians hate waging limited wars and do not overly worry about the niceties of international law. When embroiled in a conflict, one should devote all means necessary in order to emerge victorious. For as Mead (1999) puts it: "*the belief that while problems are complicated, the solutions are simple* (p. 20)" penetrates many Jacksonian-leaning minds. Thus, a great many country artists chose to disseminate condensed, simple messages about the oppressed peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq yearning for freedom,[63] about the recurring heroism, value-based patriotism and bravery of those dying in the name of freedom and liberty (Boulton, 2008, p. 379).

Nevertheless, one particular country music band was indeed "taking the long way[64]" to return to their original stardom after having voiced dissent on the eve of *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. Taking the *Billboard* country chart by storm, *Dixie Chicks* – a talented trio composed of Martie Maguire, Emily Robison and lead singer Natalie Maines – rose to much prominence throughout the 1990s thanks to the extraordinary popularity as well as critical acclaim their songs and albums garnered. With the release of *Travelin' Soldier* in 2002, a passionate plea alluring to the loss of a loved one during the Vietnam War, their future as the darlings of the nation appeared ascertained (Hostýnek, 2015, p. 28).

However, one mild-mannered "*musical speech act*" performed in front of a crowd at Shepherd's Bush Empire theatre[65] in London a mere fortnight before the

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[62] Bush himself even delivered a speech at the Islamic Centre (Boulton, 2008, p. 379)

[63] Such as Toby Keith's *American Soldier* (2003), *The Taliban Song* (2003) or Charlie Daniels' *It Ain't no Rag it's a Flag* (2001).

[64] Much like their album released in 2006 named eponymously.

[65] Now called, quite entertainingly enough, O2 Shepherd's Bush Empire.

commencement of Operation Iraqi Freedom changed all that and, without exaggeration, turned the once beloved and praised country band into fugitives. Employing the abovementioned *Travelin' Soldier* as a allegorical, symbolic background for perils yet to come, Natalie Maines, a native of Texas, uttered: "*Just so you know, we're on the good side with y'all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas* (Newman, 2013, *Shut Up and Sing*, 2006, also cited in: Hostýnek, 2014, p. 50)."

Remarkably, though, this improvised and modestly critical statement[66] sparked off a vitriolic response back in the USA in the wake of which all the Chicks had their careers ruined, CDs publicly burned, songs removed from the airwaves, and embarked upon a three-year-long hiatus. Dixie Chicks were then forced not just to take a stand, originally unintended to (*Shut Up and Sing*, 2006), against country music – rallied almost unanimously behind the 2003 invasion – itself, but also against the very national sentiment overwhelmingly supportive of the encroaching Iraqi endeavour. Understanding e.g. the importance one ascribes to geographical places, such as critically-inclined Western Europe at odds with America's deemed "gung-ho" nature, context, time and setting in which a "musical speech act" was performed and a plethora of other aspects the unabated echo of which still resonates to this day under all *Dixie Chicks'* videos on *YouTube*, hold a key to unweaving the genuine nature of the phenomenon at hand.

Yet instead of cowering in fear before fellow country musicians or the mainstream media and their consonant "war trumpets" the three *Chicks* underwent an admirable transformation epitomized by an unabated emphasis on freedom of speech,[67] gender-related issues,[68] and formally renounced their affiliation with the country music while enveloping themselves by the hearty embrace of the rock'n'roll scene (NPRMusic, 2006).

These few uneasy years of wilderness seemed to have been overcome in 2006 with the release of single *Not Ready to Make Nice*, and shortly after, no.1 best-selling album *Taking the Long Way*. While we may attribute this partial rehabilitation of the *Chicks* to the waning popular support for prolonging the war, the song itself, with nearly 11 million views on *YouTube* and 50:1 ratio of likes against dislikes, invites closer scrutiny.[69]

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[66] Unlike Jennifer Aniston who voiced her opposition more scathingly and branded George W. Bush "*a f**king idiot*" while receiving a comparatively smaller media coverage (Boulton, 2008, p. 375).

[67] Which even George W. Bush himself uneasily hinted at sometime later (*Shut Up and Sing*, 2006).

[68] Which, by today's standards, would without any doubt earn them the label of "social justice warriors."

[69] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pojL_35QlSI, March 20, 2016.

Featuring markedly contrastive black and white colours, the Chicks are displayed on a trial, being literally schooled by uptight bystanders resembling a ferocious crowd gathered at a witch process and made, in a true *Simpsons* TV show sense, write repeatedly "*to talk without thinking is to shoot without aiming*" on multiple blackboards (*Dixie Chicks*, 2006).[70] Musically speaking, minor keys employed throughout the song and a gradating crescendo reinforced by a distinctly rock vibe underscored with a violin on the way to the chorus do the overall dark and grim undertone of the music video justice. Long gone is the once upbeat lightheartedness of some of their previous songs.

As the chorus returns, the *Chicks* are shown being held under close observation in an asylum while chanting "*I'm not ready to make nice, I'm not ready to back down*", but breaking free and removing the manacles of oppression in what appears to be a metaphor for not just the actual title of the song (*Dixie Chicks*, 2006), but, perhaps more importantly, for taking a stand against those who doubted their sanity, wished to tame them and silence their pitch-perfect voices in the aftermath of the aforementioned controversy.

Ending on a relatively high note, the 4-minute-long music video displays a close-up shot of Natalie Maines, the "perpetrator", and *Dixie Chicks* holding hands in unison, heads high and at last coming to terms with their past. With upcoming tours across Europe as well as North America Dixie Chicks, often hailed as martyrs of the Bush era, fought valiantly an uphill battle against the music industry, the public as well as the elusive world of politics, and, throughout it all, never betrayed their core principles even as the world surrounding them was being rent asunder.

Furthermore, not only did this chapter serve to connect country music to Jacksonian culture, which in turn found fertile soil in the Bush administration, it also allowed us to flesh out some emerging themes already present in the case (studies) of comic books and movies of the Iraq era: the bravery and heroism of ordinary soldiers doing their best and somehow being divorced from their political leadership, the conflation of 9/11 and Iraq, and the legacy of the Vietnam War being ignited anew. Additionally, popular approval for the Iraq War[71] acted as an effective check and lid in that it kept dissonant inroads at bay and demarcated what American public was willing to accept or identify with. Yet as public support lost much of its original momentum, swung decisively in favour of large-scale disillusionment and called for a withdrawal of US

[70] Entertainingly enough, *Dixie Chicks* were actually featured on the Simpsons TV show too at the time which coincided with the release of their 2006 album mentioned above.

[71] Not to mention the pressure exerted by the government and the respective popular media establishments.

forces from a protracted "Vietnam 2.0", a crude awakening and a new[72] era of reflection dawned upon American public, as well as popular culture as a whole.

3.7 War-themed videogames and the Iraqi battlefield: Is it time for every boy (and girl) to dream of being a soldier?

"*It has become evident that the way we experience war history is inextricably linked to the forms it has taken on in media representation* (Shapiro, 2008, p. 16)."

When some 90 veterans and active duty service members occupied an *America's Army* game booth in St. Louis in 2007, while chanting "*War is not a game*" in unison as part of a "truth in recruiting" campaign segment sheltered by *Iraqi Veterans Against the War* (Andersen, Kurti, 2009, p. 45), their touching plea encapsulated, and called into question, a firm interconnectedness between the Pentagon on the one hand, and the entertainment industries on the other. In the same year, more than 3 million registered players, who could download the game client for free, aggregated over 200 million hours played since the launch of *America's Army* in 2004 (Andersen, Kurti, 2009, p. 49).

How then are we supposed to approach videogames, now a multibillion dollar global industry, the soaring popularity, growth as well as revenues of which have long since surpassed every other form of entertainment (Hostýnek, 2014, p. 93)? Given the pivotal emphasis on computer-based digital technologies – at the heart of which lies an image generator – when developing a videogame, it should come as no "game-changing" surprise that videogame popular culture artefacts and military weaponry essentially have manifold components and elements in common (Andersen, Kurti, 2009, pp. 46–47) given the military origins of computer-generated imagery. Thus, all the way from striking targets alongside Pakistani and Afghani borders with unmanned drones, to spending one's evening immersed in a *Call of Duty* instalment, the ever-growing marriage between real and virtual worlds has made the actual delineation and clear contours of each distinctly hazy at best.

Yet even though plenty of contemporary scholars of international relations have done a valiant job at de-victimizing videogames – prior considered a despicable form of social escapism and a privileged domain of, for the lack of better words, "weirdos" and nutcases – those eager to confront games as a relevant field of quality research that helps fill a gaping space in the existing literature face numerous methodological challenges. As we have already noted, comic books, movies as well as popular music each offer their

[72] At least in this millennium.

own sets of analytical perils – ranging from subjective and highly personalized interpretations rooted in visual, verbal and other aesthetics, over reading between the lines of creators' expectations and motives, to a message they might or might not seek to either explicitly or implicitly convey.

Contemporary videogames almost unequivocally contain all the aforementioned qualities combined. And so with moving images, sound, narrative and gameplay congealed and employed in tandem to produce an affective experience (Dodds, 2010, pp. 91–93), it automatically raises a valid question about what a researcher should devote his or her attention to. What is the purpose of (researcher's) interaction with the game at hand (Robinson, 2015, p. 92)? Furthermore, how does one relate this to eager and highly receptive audience composed mostly of youths capable of highly sophisticated, sometimes deeply affective, readings of popular culture artefacts way beyond the original intentions of their producers (Grayson, Davies, Philipott, 2009, p. 159)?

While acknowledging, and paying tribute to, such serious academic challenges further heightened by inadequately fleshed out analytical tools, the author, himself a well-versed videogame savant, does wish to argue that singling out one videogame facet, e.g. narrative or visual and sound qualities, and privileging it over others, invokes the risk of – to borrow from war-themed jargon – missing the target. Much like every single player experiences a game being exposed to all its components at the same time, so too should we employ the full extent of our senses so as to immerse ourselves in remarkably complex virtual worlds. Interrogating visual images, musical elements, gameplay mechanics and narrative features while bearing in mind the relative freedom as well as pre-existing limitations of player's control over his or her videogame avatar should thus represent core characteristics of anyone seeking to seriously venture into the still relatively uncharted territory of videogames.

Even though the gameplay experience does rely heavily on the player's individual ability to exhibit a basic command of videogame literacy in order to meaningfully explore the virtual playground created by the developers (Robinson, 2015, pp. 96–98), much space is left to analyze how the aforementioned videogame aspects coalesce, impact keen players and in doing so allow us to advance methodological practices and techniques within the PCWP nexus as a whole (Bos, 2015, pp. 102–103). In a similar vein, this is where non-representational theory and its emphasis on the force of intensive relationality called affect might come in handy (Dittmer, Gray, 2010, pp. 1667–1669) given the expressive power of videogames. Bogost (2006, 2007) convincingly postulates that: "*Video games have the power to make arguments, to persuade, to express ideas. But they do not do so inevitably*. […]*We need to play video games in order to understand the*

possibility spaces their rules create, and then to explore those possibility spaces and accept, challenge, or reject them in our daily lives (2006, p. 137)."

And so rather than concentrate on how games work, he suggests "[…]t*hat we turn to what they do – how they inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity* (2007, p. 45)." Which is precisely what the author intends to elaborate upon in the following case study. In the post-9/11 era teeming with heightened both domestic and security concerns, decisive solutions to complex problems were in high demand. With the ensuing Global War on Terror looming large over American psyche, a case in point needs to be made about how many videogames effectively (and even affectively) mimicked and heavily borrowed from dramatic visual footage, spectacles of catastrophe, eyewitness experiences as well as portraits of grief incessantly streamed by most mainstream media (Dodds, 2010, pp. 94–95).

Quite paradoxically, though, even if a swath of best-selling videogames[73] sought to tap into the widespread, and powerful, reservoir of affective responses elicited in the aftermath of 9/11 by, first and foremost, offering, one might even say paying a lip service to, military solutions to overcome the most cataclysmic of odds, the very depiction and portrayal of anything even remotely resembling or evoking the Twin Towers was toned down, glossed over and removed so as not to deepen the grievances or be accused of monetizing misfortune (Lane, 2011, Hostýnek, 2013, pp. 191–192). Ye while slight gameplay modifications occurring in *Command and Conquer 2: Red Alert*, *Spider-Man 2: Enter Electro* or *GTA III*[74] remained relatively subtle, videogames, especially the action genre, underwent three major shifts in the post-9/11 period.

Back in their infancy, videogame titles were, to put it simply, believed to be the preeminent domain of invincible "macho men" facing over-the-top enemies usually in a spectacular and very explosive way as exemplified by *Doom* (Totten, 2011). In short, while genre variety did exist, the best-selling titles allowed players to immerse in a virtually nonstop, inconsequential, purely joyful action devoid of moral underpinnings or being grounded in realism (Hostýnek, 2013, p. 191). However, from 2001 onwards one is able to witness a gradual shift in that once speechless action heroes have become much more relatable, have been endowed with emotionality, vulnerability, humane characteristics, and exhibit difficulties in escaping their choices and consequences (Totten, 2011).

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[73] The *Call of Duty* franchise, the Battlefield series, the *Gears of War* games and many others.

[74] Such as the last-case inability to fly an airplane notwithstanding the developers' promise.

Again, we should not consider this an elaborate stratagem to cash in on the popular sentiment of grief, but rather a clear indication of a popular medium seeking to capture the elusive spirit of shattered American consciousness buried under the pile of rubble in New York. Furthermore, gone are the days of faceless antagonists, belligerent life forms or generic aliens threatening the annihilation of our world in a detached way unrelated to our wellbeing at home. For war is no longer an exciting endeavour taking place in a "galaxy far, far away," but has been domesticated and made imminent as *Halo, Resistance* or *Mass Effect* franchises amply evince (Hostýnek, 2013, p. 192), which dovetails with the ubiquitous sense of insecurity and terror sowed in the hearts and minds of ordinary Americans.

In tandem with precipitous advances in the visual quality – graphics in general – and gameplay design tools of contemporary videogame titles, which allow for the construction of much more immersive and persuasive virtual worlds, another post-9/11 shift lies in depicting realistic, modern-day scenarios inspired by GWOT through the engaging prism of believable reality (Tottens, 2011). Long story short, it is reasonable to postulate that videogames stopped being an apolitical form of popular media, and in doing so not only attracted much, perhaps unwanted, governmental attention (Hostýnek, 2013, p. 192) – as *America's Army*, the fastest selling online first-person shooter described above demonstrates – but also decisively ventured beyond their original virtual confinements and stepped into real world "battlefields.[75]"

Yet notwithstanding the soaring popularity of first person shooters (FPS) with relatively sidelined storylines, the top 10 of which has been dominated by *Call of Duty*, *Halo* and *Battlefield* instalments,[76] these very popular culture artefacts do not shy away from occasionally pushing the envelope beyond what many would deem mainstream. As such, especially the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series[77] long known for its inclusion of defamatory, gritty and thought-provoking scenes merits being mentioned. From witnessing firsthand a nuclear explosion set in a Middle Eastern country clearly meant to represent Iraq in *Modern Warfare 1*, over letting players slaughter innocent civilians at an

[75] One only needs to think of *Homefron*t, an FPS developed by American-based Kaos Studios in 2011, the original antagonist of which was supposed to be China. Yet given the fact that the storyline would revolve around the invasion of American soil, the creators did not consider China to be "scary enough" to convincingly pose a relatable threat. Instead, North Korea – first devouring its south neighbour – was chosen. (Tottens, 2011).

[76] For more, see the appendices.

[77] The individual instalments of which were released in 2005, 2007 and 2009 respectively.

airport in Moscow in *Modern Warfare II*, to upping the ante and filming a family that meets its shocking demise in a car explosion in London in *Modern Warfare III*, videogames have also learned to adopt miscalculated decisions and situations gone wrong anathema to the pre-9/11 era (Hostýnek, 2013, pp. 194–195, Hostýnek, 2014, p. 56–59).

Nevertheless, the overarching message, as Gagnon put it: […]*resonate(s) with and reinforce(s) a tabloid imaginary of post-9/11 geopolitics, glorifies military power and elicits consent for the idea that state violence and wars are inevitable, and encourage our myopia by depicting a sanitized vision of war and by downplaying the negative consequences of state violence* (Gagnon, 2010, pp. 2–3)." Hiring military experts to assist developers in grounding their products in realism is, of course, one thing, but choosing the location of a virtual battlefield is a completely different story. So is then the time ripe for developers to thoroughly explore, and let Americans experience, perhaps even enjoy, a virtual incarnation of their country's latest military fiasco?

In terms of videogames taking place in Iraq, the corresponding page on *Wikipedia* – aggregating games featuring both the first Gulf War as well as the 2003 Iraq War – yielded nearly thirty titles.[78] Yet closer scrutiny is highly advised as some of the products predate even the 1991 *Operation Desert Storm*, such as 1985 a educational videogame titled *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?* While *Operation Desert Storm* did spark off the release of multiple games across different genres (action – top-down shooters, combat flight simulators, strategy, etc.), which tackled the raging combat encounters head on instead of beating around the (B)bush – *Patriot* (1991), *F-15 Strike Eagle III* (1992), *Operation Secret Storm* (1992) as well *as Operation: Desert Storm* (1991), it is safe to estimate that the actual sales of many such explicitly pro-war, one-sided games left much to be desired as meagre sales of only about 2500 copies regarding *Operation: Desert Storm* clearly serve to demonstrate.[79]

That is of course not to deny these military-themed titles certain gameplay as well as aesthetic qualities given that at the beginning of the 1990s the entire videogame industry still had a long way to go to reach contemporary visuals, yet in understanding why the abovementioned products commercially underperformed despite undeniable appeal and real world linkage, one only needs to invoke the impending releases of *Wolfenstein* (1992) as well as *Doom* (1993), soon to be joined by the *Pokémon* and *Super*

[78] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Video_games_set_in_Iraq.

[79] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation:_Desert_Storm_(video_game)

Mario mania coming from Japan, which all largely eclipsed any meaningful competition.[80]

Furthermore, taking into account how fast the videogame industry was booming throughout the 1990s, players may have yearned for higher-quality graphics, innovative gameplay features and unmitigated entertainment rather than overly serious titles depicting real world scenarios. Be it as it may, in the fairly unforeseeable era following the 2003 *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, several best-selling titles shipping millions of copies worldwide, as well as garnering positive critical reception, sought to approach the latest American military venture differently from their forebears in the 1990s. While *Join Task Force* (2006), *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Conviction* (2010) and *Battlefield 3* (2011) employed real world background of various countries (including, of course, Iraq) across the globe to unfold a global struggle thus mimicking the GWOT with America as the leader of the free world at its core, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) was set in a fictional middle-eastern country where political turmoil as well as growing radicalism rampant ad absurdum put the world as a whole in danger. Therefore, even though the actual genres differed considerably – from FPS, over third-person stealth games, to strategy, what clearly stands out is their unequivocal emphasis on global interconnectedness of insurgent groups, terrorist networks or simply those who wish to do us harm.

Dominating the entertainment landscape, especially the *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* franchises sought to accommodate truly grand geopolitical struggles on the results of which the fate of our world hangs, and, perhaps more importantly, which the player can actively influence (Power, 2007, p. 272). In a sense, planetary threats putting the wellbeing of millions at risk allow for majestic stakes, beckon much urgency and give players' interventions in these global affairs explored usually from the point of view of a relatively ordinary soldier much appeal that has, as we have already mentioned, translated into multi-billion revenues (Bos, 2015, pp. 103–104). Furthermore, as the age-old saying goes: "*Violence sells*."

As such, what war-themed videogames especially in the post-Iraq era have brilliantly succeeded in exploiting, is their unmistakable proclivities toward reducing complex, far-reaching problems and issues down to a smoking barrel of a gun. Simply put, military solutions are preferred, vindicated and favoured in the lieu of diplomacy or negotiations, in doing so paralleling the "go-it-alone" mentality associated with Iraq and the Bush administration. Akin to the *Combat Zone* comic book and perhaps similarly to

[80] As postulated in this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uiqGxn0P1M.

Hurt Locker, soldiers, rather than flip-flopping politicians, win wars through their sheer perseverance, moral superiority and willingness to sacrifice themselves for a just cause, greater good or completing a given objective.

For it is this very "*kill or be killed*" mentality that drives players, who often face ambushes or superior numbers of "bogies" during the course of a single-player campaign, forward to depose villainous dictators possessing WMDs, generals and high-ranked military staff gone rogue and foist the plans of those plotting to annihilate the world. Yet apart from "grand scales" and "simple solutions," Andersen and Kurti believe that war-themed videogames make a new generation of players indifferent to and detached from the perpetuated idea of "killing" (2009, p. 57) as well. And so, "*military training on video games can be understood as an important step in becoming desensitized to the "idea" of killing* (p. 57)."

While pulling the trigger first in a virtual environment may appear inconsequential, almost tangible fear and frustration looming large especially over both Vietnam and Iraq war zones (Andersen, Kurti, 2010, pp. 58–59) have resulted in thousands of soldiers suffering from PTSDs who simply cannot "turn off" the daunting reality in front of their eyes or walk away unscathed (Hedges, 2008). Paradoxically then, striving for realism, believable weaponry and authentic combat experience falls short of expressing emotional turmoil a US soldier stationed in Iraq, oftentimes trained to be devoid of compassion (Andersen, Kurti, 2010, pp. 58–59), goes through; a task for which comic books, movies, popular music as well as videogames seem to be underequipped.

Ultimately, one's own experiences are always unique and irreplaceable and while popular forms of entertainment can be educational, informative and at the same time fun to immerse in, one might have a hard time deducing a causal link. Interestingly enough, (Western) video games have experienced a major boom in Iraq throughout the past couple of years, which many attribute to them being "[…]*a way to keep a generation away from the capricious bombings that have made the streets* (of Baghdad) *some of the most perilous in the world*. (Parkin, 2013)." As the touching story of Yousif Mohammed, a Baghdad-born top player of *Battlefield 3*, demonstrates, for Iraqis themselves videogames have come to represent a popular, and safe, form of escapism from everyday miseries (Parkin, 2013) and have thus enjoyed a relatively relaxed attitude from players' parents.[81] On the other hand, *Six Days in Fallujah*, an unreleased third-person shooter in

[81] This might very well serve as another illuminating topic worthy of further research. How do Western videogames impact the lives of ordinary Iraqis? And, perhaps more importantly, how has that changed since ISIS made manifest?

development by US-based Atomic Games since 2009 – perhaps the only videogame to date to portray an actual Iraq combat operation[82] – faced vigorous backlash and met with severe criticism uttered by, among other, British war veterans feared it might trivialize horrific events and glorify poor judgement (*GamePolitics*, 2009).

Even though its developers countered the accusations on the grounds of telling the stories of the Marines who were in Fallujah; stories divorced from politics or legitimacy of the entire spectacle (Nelson, 2009), as of December 2015, there has been no news regarding a possible release date someday in the future. The developers' undoubtedly well-intended defence seems to reinforce our findings and claims about not just war-themed videogames per se, but popular forms of media in the post-Iraq era in general: shying away from debating political reasoning and legitimacy for launching a pre-emptive war, all forms of popular media we explored feature in some way a uniting theme of unbreakable resolve, bravery and determination of young men and women fighting on the ground. Theirs is a legacy unfit for us to raise doubts about.

3.8 Case study: Spec Ops: The Line – Don't be a Hero?

Nevertheless, one studio in particular stands out as a critical voice in the Iraq aftermath questioning the rationale for war. Yager Development and their relatively well received[83] third-person cover-based shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* released in June 2012 attempted to send a rather different, even artistic, message. While its third-person elements borrowing heavily from both *Mass Effect* and *Gears of War* franchises proved mediocre at best, it succeeded in offering a surprisingly convincing, yet at first subtle, look inside the mind of a killer who merely follows orders; valiant effort praised by many critics (Hamilton, 2012, Bassett, 2013), which even led to *Spec Ops* winning IGN's Best PC Story of 2012 Award (Bassett, 2013).

With 2K Games[84] boldly allowing for much artistic creativity as well as risky narrative choices, both Walt Williams, Richard Pearsey – the main writers – as well as leader designer Cory Davis were given virtual freedom in producing a game with standard gameplay mechanics, but surrogating basically all other aspects – visuals, soundtrack and

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[82] Based on the six-days-long heated encounters in November 2004 at the end of which US forces triumphed.

[83] But commercially underwhelming with approximately 1 million units sold – a meager result for any AAA game (Bassett, 2013), which some attributed to lackluster multiplayer elements.

[84] The publisher.

narrative – to imbue it with an extraordinary tale of one person's gradual psychological degradation as a consequence of indefensible moral choices originally motivated by doing good, or as we have already noted: another facet comprising the grim reality of PTSD.

Set in a sandstorm-ridden, contemporary Dubai, two weeks prior to the player's arrival – embodied by Cpt. Martin Walker who is accompanied throughout the game by two ethnically diverse team members Lt. Alphanso Adams and Staff Sgt. John Lugo – we are told that a fictional 33rd Infantry Battalion led by Col. John Konrad, himself a decorated war hero from Afghanistan suffering from PTSD, went rogue and committed countless atrocities on civilians. While a significant portion of 33rd staged a coup d'état against Konrad and attempted to carry out the original rescue mission prompted by mounting dust storms across Dubai, their latest whereabouts were unknown at the time of player's arrival.

Unlike Bos (2015) who employed a video camera to record and capture a wide range of affective responses players were experiencing when exposed to the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series, we had no such tools at our disposal and so what follows is a highly personal account of a video game that took the author around 15 hours in total to reach the credit scene (the ending), and contextualized within the emerging post-Iraq era framework hovering above popular forms of media.

Immediately from the mise-en-scène in the main menu the background of which depicts a ragged American flag hung upside down underlined by a peculiarly auto-tuned version of American national anthem, the player is quickly reminded that this will, without any doubt, be a rather unusual experience. When the player first takes control of the main protagonist as a chopper drops him at the outskirts of Dubai, we are introduced to a decaying city of ghosts upon which devastating forces of nature left an indelible mark and serve as a powerful reminder of the limitations physical geography imposes upon the conduct of warfare; a recurring theme we hinted at in the first chapter via Robert Kaplan's acclaimed *Revenge of Geography* (2012) with respect to Iraq's hostile and merciless environment. Both the lead writers happen to have had firsthand experience with sandstorms, which did much, in the author's opinion, to set the overall mood and tone of the game in a convincing way (Pitts, 2012).

Leading a Delta Force squad of three, Cpt. Martin Walker, a fairly average military man with noble intentions of lending a hand to a "second" rescue mission, is then tasked to locate any survivors of the lost 33rd Brigade and uncover the tangled trails of what lies dormant beneath the sandy surface and what had really taken place in Dubai. Even if the actual gameplay mechanics might give off a bland vibe unable to reach the thrill of taking control of one of the marines in a *Gears of War* game or Commander

Shepard in the *Mass Effect* franchise, perhaps the closest and most similar third-person iterations gameplay-wise, it does allow for understanding the basic features right from the get-go. Simply put, even newcomers to third-person shooters will unlikely struggle to grasp the basic mechanics, while those more familiar with the action/war-themed genre as a whole will feel "at home."

Yet unlike some of its competitors, in *Spec Ops: The Line* covers are merely a temporary method of sheltering from enemy fire as enemies' surprising intelligence does pose a significant challenge even on medium difficulty; the one the author chose as well. Furthermore, players are highly encouraged not to waste their ammunition and given that odds are never in their favour, one method of refilling one's magazines did indeed stand out: engaging enemies – represented mostly by the rogue 33rd battalion – in close-quarter combat. While the author himself has managed to explore numerous action videogame titles, this very feature of rewarding players for melee combat (by repeatedly pressing the "F" button when in close proximity) the consequences of which are portrayed very grittily and graphically is rarely heard of in modern videogames.[85]

As the story was rather slow to gain momentum and the main antagonist (and his true motives or identity) nowhere in sight, the author almost lost interest halfway through the game. Yet upon a second glance, from that point onward *Spec Ops: The Line* started undergoing some subtle, but meaningful, changes reinforcing the overall narrative that made the author realize the relatively detached way of carving through "hordes" of enemies because the game simply tells you to, may have been intended by the developers so as to send a revolting message; an observation Bassett (2013) seems to agree with.

Reeking mediocrity and blandness of most combat encounters done in a much better way elsewhere is gradually transformed into a cautionary tale of descending[86] into madness with no clear moral lines. The loading screens themselves – while originally supportive of the player's endeavours – started taking jabs at the player with incendiary statements such as: "*To kill for yourself is murder, to kill for your government is heroic, to kill for entertainment is harmless*," or "*How many Americans have you killed today?*[87]"

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[85] Only the latest *Tomb Raider* installment (2016) offered something distantly similar with collecting arrows from corpses of your enemies. For even more gruesome grittiness, see the Gears of War franchise.

[86] Idiomatically as well as literally, given that every consecutive mission makes the player descent deeper into the troubled city.

[87] Similar critical lines also did not escape the attention of two US marines who spent some time in Iraq and were willing to share their thoughts about the game. While praising how it tackled psychological stress war inflicts, they were swift to nitpick the inaccurate portrayal of weapons a players can choose from. See: http://kotaku.com/5965192/what-does-a-marine-think-of-spec-ops-the-lines-violent-war-critique

Before the dust settled, the author, and many reviewers as well as players, had realized that Cpt. Walker and his team of grudging companions were the "bad guys" all along.

At one point during the build-up to the finale, the player is forced to utilize a white phosphorous cannon – one of the deadliest chemical weapons featured in warfare – to clear an area swarming with enemies, which would otherwise prove impossible to cross. But apart from the troops, the player also witnesses burnt corpses of 47 civilians obliterated alongside the enemies. In another scene, after having spent a great deal of time talking to Konrad – the alleged mastermind behind the entire spectacle[88] – over radio, the player comes at a crossroad, which is somehow emblematic of the game as a whole. In an intense scene the player is commanded to either kill a civilian for stealing, or eliminate his guard for killing this thief's entire family when attempting to apprehend him.

However, a third, hidden option allowed the author and other keen observers (Bassett, 2013) to aim for the actual enemy that was forcing you to make this horrendous decision all along. For it is precisely this very notion of "thinking outside the box"[89] that *Spec Ops: The Line* seeks to encourage by challenging players not just to think critically about the necessity (or effectiveness) of violence as a perpetual method of problem solution, but also to identify with, and take the role of, a character with degrading sanity who shows unmistakable symptoms of PTSD – emotional numbness in responding to events, advanced detachment and lack of any high-spiritedness – so typical for countless young Americans returning from Vietnam as well as Iraq battlefields.

While the author does not wish to spoil the four possible endings *Spec Ops: The Line* contains, it is imperative to bear in mind how remarkable of a success it was that a relatively unknown studio, sheltered by 2K Games – a publishing giant – defied mainstream stereotypical first/third-person shooters and their depiction of violence as a miraculous, omnipresent tool for solving any issues in tandem with the sheer, undeniable bravery of individual soldiers, at a time when dominant positions of all *Call of Duty*, *Gears of War* as well as *Battlefield* franchises appeared ascertained in the videogame industry. While *Spec Ops: The Line* arguably did falter when it comes to entertaining or innovative gameplay mechanics, its strong and persuasive narrative seeks to remind us of

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[88] Who, in the end, turns out to be Walker's imaginary self while real Konrad died two weeks before the team's arrival to Dubai.

[89] Quite surprisingly, *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (2010) also gave players the ability to alter the outcome of the single-player story campaign by e.g. aiming for a victim's leg instead of his head, nevertheless, in comparison to major role-playing videogames the likes of *The Witcher* or *Mass Effect*, the overwhelming majority of *Call of Duty* narratives remains, while thrilling and very explosive, distinctly straightforward disallowing for any meaningful choices.

just how destructive blindly following orders without giving a second thought about their nature may turn out to be.

In a sense, this subversive critique of the military shooter genre could very well be extended to the Bush administration too given its "shoot first, ask later" mentality regarding Iraq and this war of choice that America so eagerly embarked upon. Nevertheless, it has become evident that thirteen years since *Operation Iraqi Freedom* commenced, not even a single type of popular media we analyzed here fully embraced and faced up to the horrendous legacy of the 2003 Iraq War. While there have been occasional glimpses of hope and critical thinking reinforced by plummeting public support for the war, the time still does not appear to be right (as well as ripe) for popular media to adopt and "popularize" Iraq for what it was: the most disastrous foreign policy fiasco since the Vietnam War.

Yet at the same time a new, sweeping phenomenon built on the ashes and spoils of the Iraq War has emerged – ISIS. Controlling vast swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria and thus challenging the supposed indelibility of the 1917 Sykes Picot agreement, this very Islamic State has not only been sending chilling messages of terror, brutality and resourcefulness to the rest of the world, but has also defied conventional logic of warfare. Its purported leaders proudly proclaimed in 2014: "*If you fight us, we become stronger and tougher. If you leave us alone, we grow and expand.* (Hoffman, 2016)." Some fear a possible merger between al Qaeda and ISIS – citing their gradual rapprochement during 2014 – makes achieving some joint modus vivendi alarmingly tangible, rather than fanciful, and would pose a far greater risk for an already overburdened Europe foaming with mounting internal tensions, as well as the "Rest." Short of a devastating Huntingtonian "clash of civilizations," the stars have not been aligned yet and there is still hope.

As we are supposedly entering a sixth milestone – called the Total Confrontation Stage according to the al Qaeda handbook (Hoffman, 2016) – on a windy path toward witnessing the caliphate triumph over the rest of the world, a growing corpus of literature has commenced being published on how ISIS itself adapts various features from manifold kinds of popular media – music,[90] cinematography,[91] and a glossy propaganda magazine dubbed *Dabiq* (Clarion Project: 2014) featuring highly stylized layouts mimicking the

[90] For an ISIS anthem, feel free to watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fT8NWowhSg8.

[91] Behold ISIS' very own blooper reel at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pG6hGiAwlxg or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4dv2PxH44s.

abovementioned war-themed videogames – to appeal to its audience[92] both within the controlled territory as well as outside it (Kalinič, 2015, pp. 115 – 116). All this then brings the PCWP nexus to a completely new level as we bear witness to not only popular culture reflecting, portraying and mediating geopolitical issues, but also at the same time bemoan a real world, state-like entity that borrows heavily from particular (audio)visual and aesthetic qualities and elements linked almost exclusively to Western popular culture. Although much research still needs to be conducted on the largely uncharted field of synergy between ISIS, an unintended offshoot of the 2003 Iraq War, and popular culture, it serves as a pivotal reminder about the mutual permeation of real and virtual worlds alike; itself a daunting realization many from the discipline of international relations have taken their time to grasp. For these are indeed the best of times to be an academic, as well as the worst of times to watch the world wail at its seams.

[92] The target demographic of which appears to be young men around the age of 25 (Kalinič, 2015, p. 115).

4. CONCLUSION

Quo Vadis, America? Its tumultuous history at the end of which America emerged as the sole remaining superpower has been literally dotted with course-altering moments, occasions and events. In our modern era, both Vietnam and Iraq have come to represent stunning precipices and blows dealt to American foreign policy as a consequence of which America's reputation and credibility around the globe suffered tremendously (not to mention hundreds of thousands of lives lost on both sides). In fact, the disastrous debacle of the 2003 Iraq War still appears to be looming large over contemporary America as it attempts to adjust as well as adapt to another military failure worsened by mounting expenditures, the emergence of ISIS as well as swelling numbers of soldiers in urgent need of PTSD treatment.

Throughout the course of the first chapter we sought to uncover the tangled and intertwined history of US-Iraq relations, which occasionally made the USA side with Hussein's regime to, supposedly, fend off even less rosy prospects while maintaining its national interests in the Gulf region intact. Even though Iraq, itself a perennial, desert cradle of instability, had been no bastion of liberty before Saddam's rise to power shuffled the regional balance of power – or what was left of it in 1979 – it was largely due to the bloody standstill with Iran during the 1980s and the first Gulf War in 1991 that Iraq was brought under close observations by consecutive U.S. governments.

Notwithstanding the relatively effective methods of coercive enforcement – sanctions regime, UN inspections as well as regular air strikes – the Clinton administration, lamenting its own lack of problem-solving capacity and bogged down in the Balkans, merely passed any chances of a permanent solution of the Iraq issue – and Saddam's continuing dictatorship – to the successive Bush administration. Nevertheless, Bush, who would himself soon resort to framing 9/11 by employing the Huntingtonian, civilizational paradigm enveloped in a binary black and white rationale and unleash a global war on terror(ism) with America leading the pack of like-minded countries and storming Afghanistan, argued for caution regarding Iraq in the highly debatable 2000 elections.

Yet even though a presidential regime allows the president to muster much more executive power than his or her parliamentary counterparts, it would be too simplified a misnomer to put the blame on, or even trial as some have suggested, Bush and Bush alone for waging the 2003 war of choice. For neoconservative roots ran deep in the Bush administration. While Paul Wolfowitz provided intellectual justification positing Hussein alongside Hitler or Stalin, Vice President Cheney, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld and their myriad aids both inside as well as outside the government "sold the war" to the public by

literally commencing to sound the war horn for invading Iraq in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

By fabricating evidence, silencing any meaningful voices of dissent, exaggerating weak intelligence and incessantly circulating the hawkish message in eager media, those bent on neoconservative agenda in the Bush administration succeeded in convincing American public about Saddam being the despicable perpetrator, the mastermind armed with WMDs who was responsible for shattering the American dream in the ashes of 9/11. With Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell – both originally very sceptical and cautious about the possibility, or even convenience, of another invasion in such a rapid fashion – putting their credentials behind making the case for war, was likely the decisive moment in orchestrating the 2003 Iraq War that made Bush green-light the invasion and embark upon the "three trillion war" (conservative estimates); war for which America was ill-equipped, understaffed, undermanned and in terms of actual plans, strategies or post-war reconstruction, not ready by a large margin. Winning a few intense battles sure made for glossy headlines praising superior technology and the bravery of those embroiled in combat, yet reconstructing a defeated nation and planting that "seed of democracy" in a growingly hostile environment reeking with erupting insurgencies turned out to be a completely different story.

Some may attribute America's impotence regarding post-war reconstruction to its inability to keep Pentagon, politics in general, out of meddling with what was going on in Iraq. In contrast, the 1991 Gulf War covered on a 24/7 basis by *CNN*, while undoubtedly with its own set of challenges, saw military leadership hold the reigns much tighter and in doing so rendered the interference of American political leadership virtually insignificant. Also, we need to bear in mind the actual state and mindset of US Army trained, ever since Vietnam, to "shock and awe" as well as triumph by mounting awe-inspiring numbers without ever worrying much about what comes after the dust settles.

While the occupation force did eventually adapt to the fairly unfamiliar nature of combat and urban warfare from 2005 onwards, it was way too overdue to alter in any meaningful way the rather downhill characteristics of Iraqi regime in transition. As the 2008 "surge" in troop numbers authorized by President Bush did much to counter the rising unrest and turmoil, ultimately, as evinced by President Obama's almost complete withdrawal of US forces in 2011, it merely delayed the gradual deterioration of the country as a whole and ushered in the eventual reverse of victories hard fought and paid for. Although America's commitment to Iraq's stability and security was explicitly reaffirmed by President Obama, a new contender began vying for control of Iraqi and Syrian territory and gathering momentum instigated by the spoils – mostly remaining

military equipment, dysfunctional government and popular sentiment distrustful of foreign invaders – of the 2003 Iraq venture.

And so, with ISIS exerting control over larger swaths of Iraqi territory than the coalition forces ever could have, American foreign policy has indeed entered an unenviable situation akin to the similarly daunting aftermath of the Vietnam War. Only this time around, the world is no longer demarcated by two competing ideological blocks, but is instead epitomized by unfettered migration, well-hidden terrorist "sleeper cells" and many other perks and perils associated with the 21st century.

Furthermore, the final – third – assertion constituting the case for invading Iraq (the first two being possession of WMD and sponsoring terrorists linked to 9/11) tirelessly trumpeted by Wolfowitz soon dwindled to obscurity as ordinary Iraqis, freed from an oppressive regime, were considerably worse off in the wake of the 2003 Iraq War than in the pre-*Operation Iraqi Freedom* era. Lacking access to electricity, tapped water, education or at least partially functioning labour market, it comes as no surprise that ISIS, in all its ruthlessness, generously provides its adherents with what the coalition forces could not and has thus been basking in remarkable popular support from locals as well as foreigners. Not only did America fail to convincingly eradicate the insurgency wreaking havoc across Iraq since at least 2004, but also in not wresting the country from its hands as well as blatantly underestimating confidence-building measures aimed at winning the hearts and minds of a defeated country, American protracted adventure in Iraq significantly contributed to making the steep emergence of ISIS possible.

That is not a speculative allegation of someone unaware of e.g. Bush's valiant contributions to strengthening America's commitment to providing development assistance, but rather an acute observation of a constantly shifting environment miles away from parading on and witnessing "the streets of Baghdad erupt in endless joy." Ultimately then, as our first research question posited, while each single assertion, if backed by solid evidence, on which the geopolitical rationale for invading Iraq was built may under certain conditions in itself suffice to legitimize a foreign intervention, in reality the evident falsehoods foisted by the Bush administration rushing to this war of choice rendered any justifications invalid and indefensible.

Iraq may thus very well become Vietnam 2.0 given the tremendous expenditures, human casualties on both sides as well as the malaise that ensued after America's departure. Only this time around, the spill-over effect has become chillingly real. Therefore, context, substance and place in time serve as essential variables, which has also been the paramount case for the four types of popular media portraying, depicting and mediating the 2003 Iraq War we chose to engage with.

In order to accommodate our research efforts within a larger theoretical framework that would provide us adequate analytical tools for exploring the abovementioned four types of popular media in depth, we opted for the relatively new, unfurnished field of popular geopolitics the author himself is well acquainted with. Borrowing heavily from culture studies, audience studies, geopolitics, international relations, anthropology as well as a plethora of other related fields and sub-disciplines, those eager to engage with popular media and their cohabitation with world politics still face a considerably challenging task of making popular geopolitics an authentic, standalone field of research.

While Tuathail's towering publication *Critical Geopolitics* (1996) served as a cornerstone for paving the way toward a tripartite understanding of geopolitics composed of formal geopolitics, practical geopolitics and popular geopolitics, it was arguably not until 2015 that a partial consolidation of the entire "branch" overemphasizing the importance of mere textual analyses enjoyed some limelight. For it was Caso's and Hamilton's incisive and thought-provoking book titled *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* which aimed at building bridges and surpassing deemed theoretical incoherence by introducing the Popular Culture – World Politics (PCWP) nexus. In doing so they succeeded in bringing many acclaimed academics as well as popular culture enthusiasts together to further not just the available research agenda, but also, perhaps more significantly, its theoretical framework.

As such, the PCWP nexus generously expands on various concepts native to some of the aforementioned, related fields, such as: representational logics, visual aesthetics, sonorous elements, affect and emotions, audience's reception, intertextuality as well as "real world" phenomena the likes of the GWOT, soft power, propaganda or global economy so as to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the elusive collage labelled popular culture. By no means then did the author intend to monopolize his own interpretation of the four analyzed kinds of popular media's engagement with the 2003 Iraq War as the sole possible prism especially when one takes into account the constantly changing popular culture environment abounding with indefinable variables.

Therefore, some of the common features and uniting themes that we believe emerged in all comic books, movies, popular music as well as videogames in the wake of the 2003 Iraq War, occasionally extending back to the 9/11 sentiment, are of course welcome subject to future discussions as the legacy of Iraq does not appear to be waning anytime soon. However, despite these undeniable shortcomings, we are more than convinced that the PCWP nexus offers much promise and might very well turn out to be the major breakthrough to bring popular geopolitics to the fore of emerging scholarly attention while skilfully addressing the sceptics.

9/11 changed America. While several videogames had any explicit references to e.g. the Twin Towers or airplanes removed, some comic books had entire storylines and narratives altered so as to better reflect and tap into the popular patriotic sentiment. As many movie makers, their flicks, together with countless popular musicians rallied behind their fatherland in a challenging new era bristling with heightened security concerns, the government was swift to realize the convenience of popular media as welcome platforms for conveying its messages and agenda. True, that was indeed no unprecedented epiphany. Yet given how close the information and communication technologies brought the worlds of both entertainment industries and politics (or military, for that matter), President Eisenhower's fears about the soaring power of the military-industrial complex (as discussed in the case of voluminous American support for a few selected regimes in the Middle East from the 1950s onwards) appear to have been extended to the emerging military-industrial-*entertainment* complex.

Thus, in the post-9/11 era, many have heeded the call of duty. Former military personnel (or still serving soldiers) advising videogame developers on e.g. authenticity of weaponry, remarkably successful recruitment projects materialized in the unwaveringly popular videogame called *America's Army*, generous governmental subsidies, and material assistance in general, to Hollywood moviemakers as well as popular musicians' concert tours both home and on the frontlines have come to represent just the tip of a much grander iceberg. Nevertheless, despite apparent pro-government sentiments, most popular media – albeit boosting the support for the Bush administration – exhibited great reluctance in explicitly endorsing governmental policies in making the case for invading Afghanistan, or, to put it simply, in calling for vengeance. Instead, broadly speaking, the vast majority of popular culture artefacts lamented the loss of American lives, highlighted the bravery of first respondents and, if anything, advocated compassion and unity rather than fierce, unilateral hawkishness.

Yet as the momentum was being gathered for invading Iraq mere two years after Afghanistan, some popular media appeared to have been gravitating outside the sphere of governmental support most evinced by cartoons and comic books. Enjoying relative freedom and artistic independence, both cartoon strip as well as comic book authors were certainly not beating around the bush when tackling the case for invading Iraq or its aftermath.

As for cartoon strips, we may attribute their straightforwardness to fairly confined spaces in newspapers disallowing for blandness and encouraging strong messages to reach the readers. Comic books, similarly to movies as well as videogames – media using visual components – underwent a significant transformation in their unequivocal emphasis on

gritty realism, down-to-earth scenarios, and combat factuality embellished by visual convincingness. The following case study in which we explored *Combat Zone: The True Tales of GIs in Iraq*, one of the rare cases of a positive portrayal of American endeavours, saw us uncover a crucial finding present in virtually all other kinds of popular media: *politics has no place on the battlefield*.

No matter what we may think of the dubious rationale for taking Iraq by (desert) storm, American young men and women do their best to free an oppressed nation regardless of any obstacles or (un)favourable political climate. Therefore, their legacy is not up to debates or, worse yet, criticism. As we have seen, though, divorcing politics from combat experience and operations could not be further from the actual state of affairs. This very incongruence between popular media's depiction and reality was also markedly visible in the *Hurt Locker* movie, which, in a nutshell, cast the occupation troops, addicted to the adrenaline rush of battle, as almost an oppressed force trying to save the lives of ordinary Iraqis by defusing explosive devices. Even though most movies either directly or indirectly raising doubts about the Iraq War as a whole failed to meet commercial expectations, *Hurt Locker*, an Oscar-winning film, skilfully balances on the line and in doing so shows us the extent to which the cinematographic industry is willing to go to adapt to the growing public disillusionment with the Iraq War.

As such, another underlining theme permeating popular media has been the gradual acceptance, or perhaps incorporation of, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as an essential component and feature of post-Iraq War popular culture artefacts. In the light of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, swelling numbers of soldiers suffering from PTSD as well as mounting governmental expenditures on treatment, admitting and realizing the grim reality of "our" heroic soldiers giving their lives so as others could live more freely, can be considered a concession that popular media had to make. For the bleak reality could no longer be ignored even by those wishing to entertain rather than moralize.

On the other hand, *Dixie Chicks*, a popular country music band attempted to do both. As we postulated, popular music has a long history of serving as a vehicle for expressing both public support as well as social unrest. Yet whereas protest songs, mostly the rock genre and country ballads, during the Vietnam era sort of *became* the most popular and listened to songs of the entire decade contributing to growing public frustration, speaking of the Iraq War, it has not exactly been the case. We may attribute this somehow muted and fragmented response to major music publishing corporations being unwilling to experiment and/or cater to critical ears, fearing the loss of profit. Apart from "playing it safe," it is noteworthy that unlike in the build-up to the Vietnam War, in

2003 there was simply no draft that would forcibly wrest young Americans from their families and dispatch them to fight and die on the other side of the globe.

While notable musical efforts to e.g. impede Bush's 2004 re-election bid did exist, in the long run the then most popular artists the likes of Britney Spears or Justin Timberlake came out to openly endorse the Bush administration at the time the public support for the Iraq War was at roughly 75%. The bravery of American soldiers was, again, unworthy of any criticism or counter-narrative musical responses.

Thus, when *Dixie Chicks* dared to oppose the war, and George W. Bush per se, on a concert tour in Kagan's and Habermas's dovish Western Europe through one mildly critical musical speech act, Americans stood appalled and sent *Dixie Chicks*, the former darlings of the nation, to marginality. Furthermore, country music is believed to be rooted in the Jacksonian tradition of American foreign policy and as such, opposing a war instead of "going all out" was bound not to come across as appealing. Enter 2006, the war was not going well and the public opinion swung, for the first time, in disfavour of the invasion. In the same year *Dixie Chicks* made a resounding, audible comeback with their hit song "*Not Ready to Make Nice*" followed by a music video the visual as well as sonorous elements of which we eagerly scrutinized. In their music video, Dixie Chicks were indeed not afraid to reaffirm their message of dissent through the scope of riveting black and white contrasts, markedly powerful minor harmonies as well as strong lyrics showing no qualms over the 2003 controversy.

As a whole, though, contemporary popular music with its myriad genres, subcultures and streams catering to audiences with shortening attention spans, has become so variegated that locating one voice of unity is virtually impossible and thus represents the most ambiguous popular medium struggling to adjust to the rapid era of the Internet rather than airwaves.

War-themed videogames, combining all the abovementioned visual aspects, sonorous features and aesthetics, experienced a major overhaul in the wake of 9/11 in that, first and foremost, brought the war home and made the main protagonists much more vulnerable as well as relatable thus marking a significant departure from the 1990s' macho men mentality. While a number of best-selling videogames such as the *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* franchises dominating the videogame industry did feature, in some ways, the Iraqi frontline, their portrayal of the Iraq War mostly belongs to a positive imagery of perpetual violence as an omnipotent problem-solving tool put to a good use by ground troops making *all* the difference.

Therefore, no matter the politics, American military, as depicted by the commercially most successful war-themed videogames, is the key variable to achieving

domestic security as well as global peace and stability. This recurring theme then appears to mirror the ultimate goals of the GWOT framework. Apart from *America's Army* assessed in the text, the only videogame set entirely in Iraq – *Six Days in Fallujah* – and portraying some of the most heated encounters of the 2003 Iraq War had its development put on halt in the light of the growing criticism by British and American war veterans alike who feared trivialization for the sake of entertainment.

The boldest critique by a major (AAA) videogame title tying into the post-Iraq War disenchantment was voiced by *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), which made for a thought-provoking attempt to raise doubts about mindless, perpetual violence under the star-spangled banner of blindly following orders. Even though the game itself, bar its surprisingly comprehensive narrative, featured mediocre gameplay mechanics, the author still had a great time engaging with it despite it being commercially underwhelming. It is also reasonable to believe that setting this game in Dubai was perhaps as close to the Iraq War as videogames to date dared to venture, while maintaining its keenness for, and a high degree of, raising the consciousness about violence, which, for a 3rd person action cover-shooter seems counterintuitive.

On the whole, though, as the popular demand for high production quality war-themed videogames with cutting edge graphics, cinematic experience and exciting explosiveness that gives the player – a soldier – a say in global affairs through his or her actions, remains high, seeing major videogame titles fully come to terms with the Iraq fiasco may turn out to be a long distance run. Until then, simple, military solutions to complex issues, reluctant engagement with PTSD and occasional glimpses of critical efforts failing to garner much popularity are here to stay.

Judging in retrospect, how should (and can we?) assess the 2003 Iraq War and its continuing impact on popular geopolitics since the pre-emptive launch of *Operation Iraqi Freedom* 13 years ago? Albeit being an unquestionable breaking point for American foreign policy – one indicative of the limits of ill-conceived military endeavours overseas – Iraq deserves due credit for reminding popular geopoliticians of just how underequipped they were (and have been) for analyzing and understanding popular culture artefacts in their growing complexity. Whereas contextual analyses may have proven sufficient at the outset of the 1990s when popular geopolitics was going through its initial stage, it no longer seems to be the case or the only suitable approach that would fully grasp the subject matter. For our world is becoming increasingly interconnected by the Internet and (popular) media alike.

And if 9/11 served as a catalyst encouraging popular geopoliticians to broaden their agenda and incorporate tools and methods from other fields so as to better

comprehend the post-9/11 reality, then Iraq, for better or worse, is believed to have accelerated this turn toward con-textual, visual aesthetics, and, above all, large-scale interconnectedness and synthesis. Nowadays, we simply cannot divorce the study of popular media from their audiences scattered across the globe and, e.g. engaged in own unique content production on the Internet. Commercial viability has, of course, always been a strong factor, but not necessarily an insurmountable obstacle. Given how tremendously variegated the contemporary world of (American) popular culture has turned out to be, academics everywhere are struggling hard to catch up with it and perfect their tools that would allow for more thorough dissections. Yet despite the existence and growing reach of the military-industrial-entertainment complex, popular media are still a vestige of a relative freedom of thought and artistic creativity that *do*, by the definition, cater to attentive public ears, but, fortunately, answer only for their own miscalculations usually "paid for" by meagre sales. No human lives were lost during (or better yet – because of) the writing of this thesis even though the unstoppable pendulum of time, vying for power and myriad other reasons made many "sleep with the fishes."

One of the perennial challenges scholars of popular geopolitics, or the PCWP nexus in general, have to better reflect upon, is the two-way relationship between consumers and producers of popular culture artefacts. For both affect each other in multiple ways as evinced by e.g. altered endings to *Mass Effect 3* (2013) or the removal of posters mentioning Allah in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009). What might come next for those willing to further bridge the gap between popular culture and world (geo)politics, though, is a closer look at how ISIS, the corollary of the 2003 Iraq War, employs various features of Western popular culture artefacts to promote its cause, appeal to its audience in a modern, sleek, fashionable, and, arguably, very dangerous way.

To conclude, not only do popular media seek inspiration in world affairs so as to produce artefacts a consumer can enjoy and process, but regional actors themselves have been increasingly employing popular culture elements venturing far beyond George W. Bush's *Top Gun*-esque "mission accomplished" speech. The unfortunate downside is that in the case of ISIS, while offering an uncharted research field, the suffering, horrendous abuses and countless lives lost in the name of a lunatic ideology impede any chances of transcending religion-based violence sanctioned by the scripture itself. This puts the very fabric of Muslim faith at stake, and so academic caution is highly advised. In the words of Dickens' *The Tale of the Two Cities* (1859): "*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of*

Darkness[…].*”* While the world creaks at its seams, let us appreciate how far popular geopolitics has come to explore the challenges of our age.

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6. RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire de master compréhensif a exploré la guerre d'Irak qui a été conduite par la coalition amassée par les États-Unis et qui a commencé officiellement le 20 mars 2003. Mais à part de seulement décrire ce conflit où ses causes et conséquences géopolitiques comme mise en oeuvre unique du concept de guerre préventive développé par le gouvernement Bush, nous avons passé la pluspart du temps en analysant quatre types de la culture populaire et leur portraits de cette guerre destructive. Dans le premier chapitre nous avons bien découvert et raconté la longue histoire de la relation entre les États-Unis et l'Irak.

En utilisant beaucoup de sources universitaires, nous avons discuté les relations amicales et aussi inamicales pendant le vingtiéme siècle. Maintenant il est evident que la première guerre du Golfe, autorisée par le Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies le 29 novembre 1990, n'a pas été terminée proprement et a cré les conditions indispensables pour les malheurs futures. Alors, le règne terrible de Saddam Hussein pouvait continuer avec quelques intrusions de la part de la Commission (UNSCOM) qui a inspecté les installations nucléaires, chimiques et biologiques irakiennes jusqu'au 9/11. Quand les terroristes islamiques ont lancé une attaque au World Trade Center en 2001, les États-Unis, et, enfin, le monde entier ont changé considérablement. Les affaires sécuritaires se sont intensifiées et ont été rendues plus fortes, par example l'Acte de Patriots.

Plus important, les États-Unis et ensuite beaucoup de pays avec les attitudes similaires, ont commencé la guerre contre le terrorism (GWOT). Pour l'auteur de ce mémoire il était impossible de trouver quelques connections entre 9/11 et le régime de Saddam Hussein dans l'Irak, mais des personnes dont on peut parler comme « les faucons », « hawks », dans le gouvernement Bush ont commencé de chercher le prétexte pour attaquer l'Irak. C'est vrai que l'opinion publique a bien supporté le cas et toutes les justifications pour *l'opération liberté irakienne*, mais en realité cettes trois raisons géopolitiques – la possession des armes nucléaires, la connexion véritable avec 9/11 et aussi l'amélioration des conditions tragiques pour les citoyens irakiens étaient, où se devenaient, fausses. Plutôt, la stratégie militaire male pour occuper et tenir l'Irak aussi come le nombre insuffisant de soldats dans cette coalition sont responsables de l'aggravation de la situation en Irak et en Moyen Orient depuis 2003. Quand nous parlons sure les dépenses, les États-Unis ont épuisé au moins 3 trillions dollars. Mais la plus mauvaise conséquence, peut-être indirecte, est la création et, aprés, l'abandonnément de conditions contribuantes pour l'émergence du phénomène ISIS - « État islamique en Irak et au Levant ».

Dans le deuxième chapitre nous avons appliqué les causes et conséquences qui étaient discutées pendant la premiére chapitre pour explorer quatre types des médias géopolitiques populaires et leur engagement et les images media de la guerre d'Irak. Pour avoir les moyens universitaires méticuleux, la théorie – qui a récennement gagné beaucoup de terrain dans la recherche scientifique – intégrée dans le constructivisme social a été choisie. Le nom est géopolitique populaire; le terrain bien connu comme l'auteur a déjà découvert lors de plusieurs occasions.

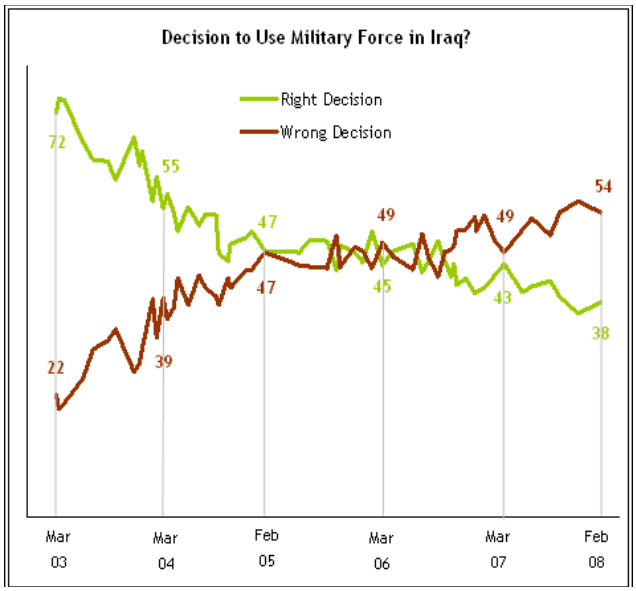
Prémièrement, nous avons discuté le monde coloré de la bande dessinée. C'était clair que la bande dessinée a beaucoup exprimé le sentiment patriotique après 9/11 – comme, généralement, tous les medias populaires américains, mais en cas de la guerre d'Irak, beaucoup de bandes dessinées avaient l'esprit de critique surprisement. Ensuite, l'étude de cas qui a analysé *Combat Zone : True Tales of GIs in Iraq* trouvait que quand une bande dessinée soutenait la guerre ou s'y opposait, c'est peut-être interdire de douter des « héros » et « héroines » qui ont libéré et fait sacrifices pour un pays périleux et oppressé. Ainsi, la politique n'a pas de lieu dans le champ de bataille.

Le deuxième type des médias géopolitiques populaires – les films – a verifié cette hypothèse. Mais les oeuvres cinématographiques ont construit l'image de la guerre d'Irak différente. C'est vrait que quelques films étaient contre la guerre ses conséquences destructives, mais ces films ont échoué à de trouver l'audience et, enfin, le nombre des spectateurs était faible. La deuxième étude de cas qui s'occupe au le film *Hurt Locker* a bien discuté les frontières contemporaines cinématographiques quand on parle la guerre d'Irak. Le troisième type de media géopolitique populaire – la music populaire – a décrit sa fragmentation et division présente et aussi la relation proche avec (géo)politique pratiquée ou formelle. À cause de cette fragmentation c'était impossible de trouver seulement un voix qui peut représenter ce type de média entier. Alors, quand des chants de l'opposition existent, par rapport à la guerre de Viêt-Nam, la music populaire a réagi avec la brise de l'incertitude. La troisième étude de cas qui a exploré un groupe country populaire *Dixie Chicks* a, encore une fois, considéré l'opposition contre la guerre d'Irak que *Dixie Chicks* ont monté instinctivement qu'en la tour d'Europe. Grace aux quelques mots du désaccord, aux États-Unis la réponse était vite et explicite : « ne critique pas notre président quand nous sommes presque au bord de l'invasion. » Aussi, un autre thème que tous les quatre types de média géopolitique populaire ont décrit est le phénomène « PTSD » – le trouble de stress post-traumatique. Pendant le dernier type – les jeux vidéo – qui forme les fondations de la géopolitique populaire contemporaine et offre plusieurs possibilités exceptionelles pour avancer la recherche entière, nous avons bien discuté et démontré tous les thème d'engagement avec la guerre d'Irak. Ensuite, l'étude

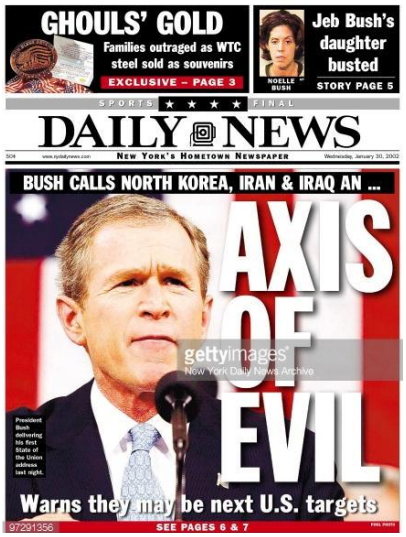
de cas qui s'occupait au jeu *Spec Ops : The Line* a prouvé que c'était peut-être un seul voix opposé à la guerre, mais indirectement. Si l'opposition était explicite, les ventes seraient plus mauvaises.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. Mais on peut dire que quand la guerre d'Irak était un désastre spectaculaire avec des conséquences indésirables, ce conflit a permis la géopolitique populaire d'engager et explorer de nouvelles méthodes de la recherche pour essayer d'addresser, par example, l'audience et les éléments visuels, narratifs, métaphoriques aussi que linguistiques que ces quatre types de médias ont introduit.

7. APPENDICES

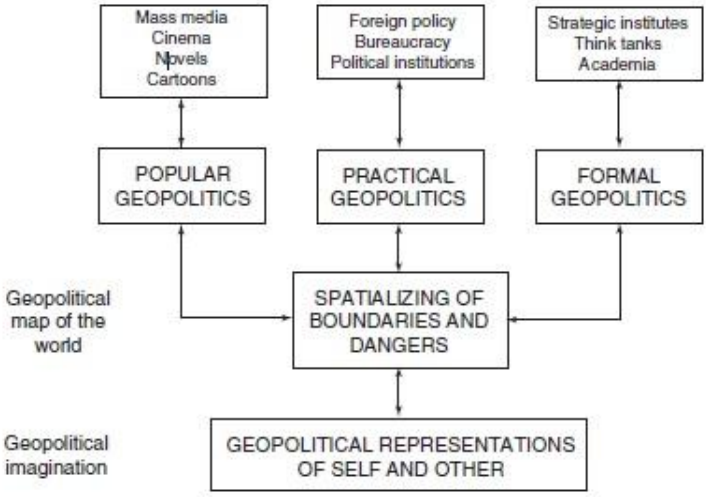


An illustrative chart exhibiting the declining support for the 2003 Iraq War from its upbeat inception in spring 2003 to resounding disapproval in early 2008. As we can deduce, during those five years weariness and gradual loss of support would have been hard to avoid even under better circumstances. Retrieved from: http://www.pewresearch.org/2008/03/19/public-attitudes-toward-the-war-in-iraq-20032008/, April 3, 2016.

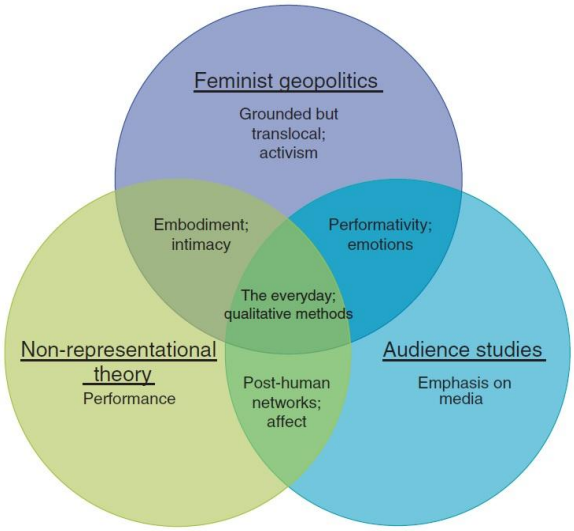


The star-spangled cover of New York's *Daily News* emphasizing Bush's (in)famous "catchphrase" day after his annual State of the Union Address in January 2003. Retrieved from: http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/daily-news-front-page-1-30-02-bush-calls-north-korea-iran-news-photo/97291356, April 3, 2016.

A photograph showcasing the surprisingly cumbersome removal of Saddam's statue in central Baghdad – at Firdos Square – in April 2003 much to the arousal of the bystanders. Also, this marked one of the highpoints of Bush's first presidential term. Retrieved from: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/saddam-statue/, April 3, 2016.



A tripartite scheme of the current state of geopolitics devised by Geáróid Ó Tuathail. Adapted from: Tuathail Ó, Gearóid. *Critical Geopolitics*. London: Routledge, 1996.



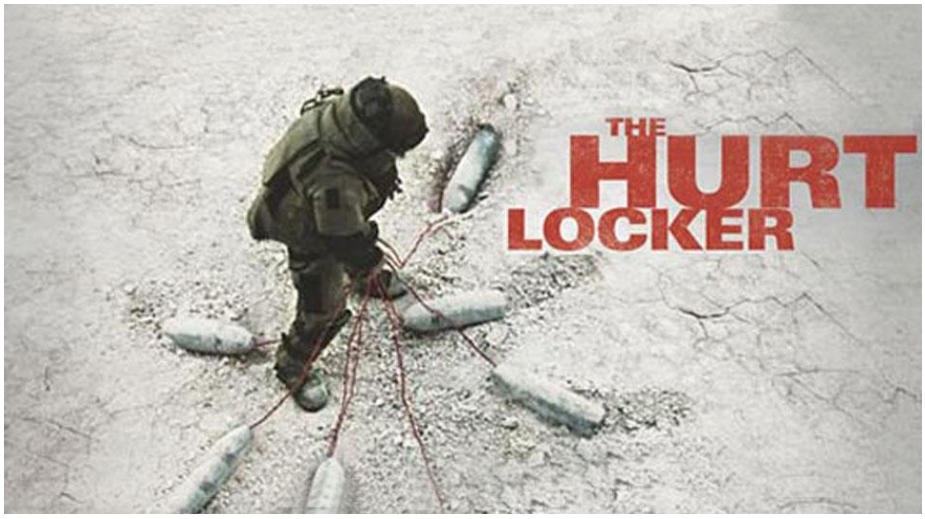
Three overlapping academic fields from which popular geopolitics, and the PCWP nexus as a whole, could draw inspiration from and, better yet, incorporate into its research methods as well as analytical tools. Adapted from: Dittmer, J. & Gray, N.: 2010. Popular Geopolitics 2.0: Towards New Methodologies of the Everyday. *Geography Compass* 11 (4): pp. 1670.

The colourful and ethnically diverse cast of characters, each with a different background, featured in *Combat Zone: The True Tales of GIs in Iraq*. Akin to the *Mass Effect*

videogame franchise, the ultimate message *Combat Zone* seeks to impart is that of unity, joint cause, togetherness and trust vis-à-vis greater odds that any single soldier could overcome alone. Zinsmeister, K.: 2004. *Combat Zone: True Tales of GIs in Iraq*. Marvel Comics: New York.

These two pages consisting of several horizontal as well as vertical panels serve to demonstrate, as we postulated in the text, the overall emphasis on realism, sepia tone and, in general, down-to-earth convincingness. Zinsmeister, K.: 2004. *Combat Zone: True Tales of GIs in Iraq*. Marvel Comics: New York.

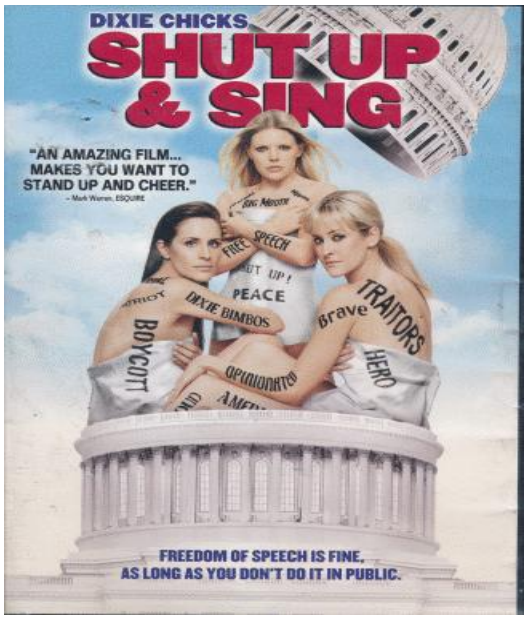
This page, taken from the final chapter, portrays heated combat encounters and the perks as well as perils of urban warfare with multiple visual as well as factual references mirroring the siege of Fallujah. In both cases American forces emerged triumphantly Zinsmeister, K.: 2004. *Combat Zone: True Tales of GIs in Iraq*. Marvel Comics: New York.



A poster accompanying the theatrical release of Hurt Locker (2009) in which the main protagonist, played by Jeremy Rainer, tackles, quite literally, and disarms improvised explosive devices. Retrieved from: http://arts.columbia.edu/hurt-locker-0, April 4, 2016.

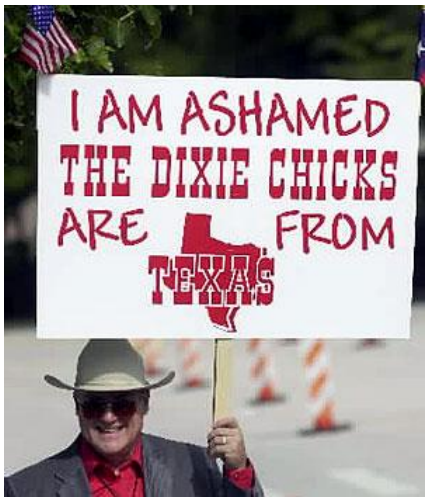
The climactic and thrillingly explosive scene taking place shortly after the main protagonist failed to rescue an Iraqi civilian encumbered by multiple explosive devices. Apart from practical effects and slow-motion, an air of persuasiveness is further advanced by shouting voices of spectating American soldiers and deafening silence soon afterwards.

Hurt Locker: 2009. Directed by Katherine Bigelow.



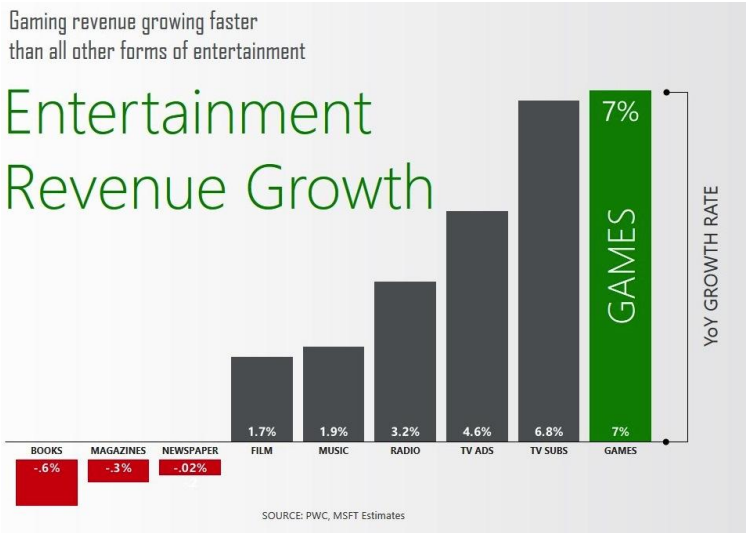
The cover of a 2006 movie exploring the stunningly far-reaching and consequential controversy surrounding Dixie Chicks. Noticeable are various either positive or negative expressions tattooed on their bodies and associated with the Chicks in the aftermath of the

critical remarks uttered on the eve of *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. Retrieved from: http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/dixie_chicks_shut_up_and_sing/, April 4, 2016.



A rather humorous photograph showcasing one's resourcefulness and wit as part of the massive backlash the opposition of *the Dixie Chicks* toward the War in Iraq instigated. Retrieved from: http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-chat/1751185/posts.

Taken from the "*Not Ready to Make Nice*" music video on YouTube. As mentioned in the text, the markedly contrastive garment as well as background underscored by catchy musical components makes for a must-watch. *Dixie Chicks:* 2009. Not Ready to Make Nice. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pojL_35QlSI, March 28, 2016.

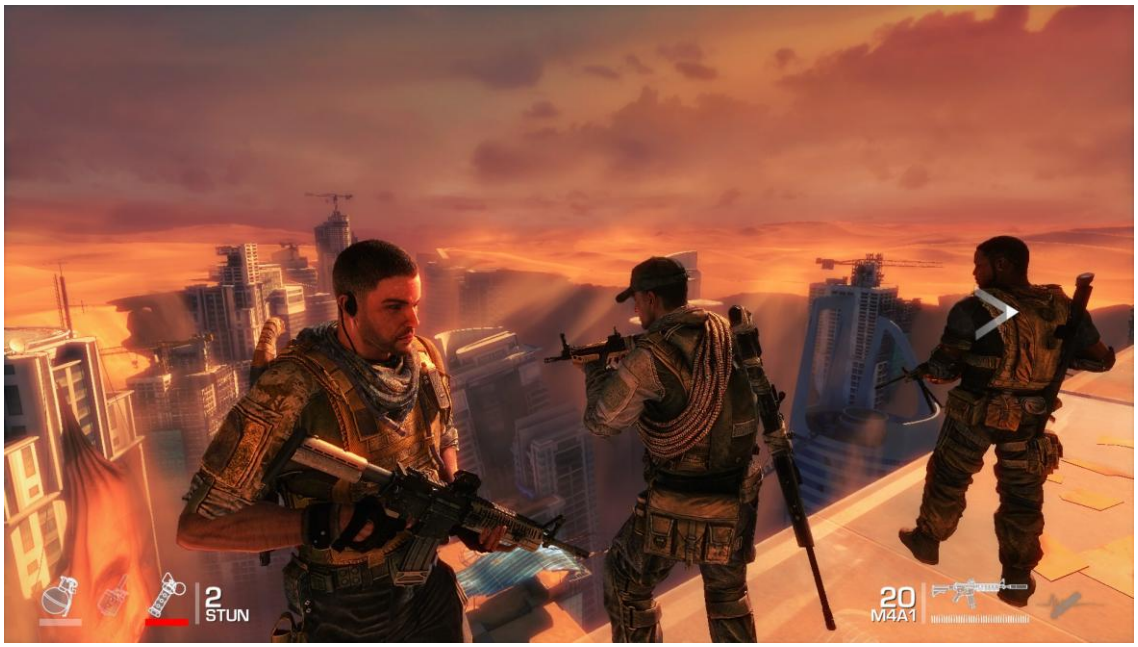


As mentioned in the thesis, videogames have been enjoying remarkably high annual growth, showing no sign of weariness and eclipsing all other sources of popular entertainment during the past couple of years. Given the soaring investments and revenues, this alone should raise much-needed academic awareness. Retrieved from: http://www.geekwire.com/2013/microsoft-global-videogame-market-hits-65-billion-consoles-lead/.

A screenshot made by the author during one cut-scene halfway through this war-themed game set in sandstorm-struck Dubai. Blazing sun, searing temperatures and sepia colour filter combine to convey authenticity paralleling the actual conditions on Iraqi battlefields.

Mechanics-wise, the player is still in control and attempting to avoid any obstacles along the slide down. *Spec Ops: The Line:* 2012. Developed by Yager Development. Publisher by 2K Games.

The main menu screen brimming with deep symbolism accompanied and instrumentalized by an auto-tuned version of the star-spangled banner. We believe no further comments are required. This has been as far as a major videogame title dared to venture so as to question perpetual violence as an effective problem-solving tool. *Spec Ops: The Line:* 2012. Developed by Yager Development. Published by 2K Games.



A screenshot showcasing the main protagonist and his two ethnically diverse squad companions who eventually start questioning and doubting the justness of their original cause as Cpt. Walker gradually descends into madness.
Spec Ops: The Line: 2012. Developed by Yager Development. Published by 2K Games.