

Why Can't Mainstream American Journalists Tell the Truth About the Horrors of America's Wars?

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Theme: [Media Disinformation, US NATO War Agenda](#)

Sebastian Junger's new documentary "Restrepo" presents the story of US soldiers at an isolated combat outpost, keeping Afghan suffering safely off the screen.

I've never heard a shot fired in anger. But I might know a little bit more about war than [Sebastian Junger](#).

Previously best known as the author of *The Perfect Storm*, Junger, a New York-based reporter who has covered African wars and the Kosovo killing fields, and [Tim Hetherington](#), an acclaimed film-maker and photographer with extensive experience in conflict zones, heard many such shots, fired by Americans and Afghans, as they made their new documentary film [Restrepo](#) — about an isolated combat outpost named after a beloved medic killed in a firefight. There, they chronicled the lives of U.S. soldiers from Battle Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, during a tour of duty in eastern Afghanistan's [Korengal Valley](#).

The film has been almost universally praised by mainstream reviewers and was awarded the Grand Jury Prize at this year's Sundance Film Festival. A New York Times "critics' pick," *Restrepo* moved the newspaper's A.O. Scott to end his glowing review by [telling readers](#): "As the war in Afghanistan returns to the front pages and the national debate, we owe the men in 'Restrepo,' at the very least, 90 minutes or so of our attention." In the Los Angeles Times, reviewer Betsy Sharkey [concluded](#) in similar fashion: "What 'Restrepo' does so dramatically, so convincingly, is make the abstract concrete, giving the soldiers on the front lines faces and voices."

Along with Hetherington, Junger, who has also recently experienced great success with his companion book *War*, shot about 150 hours of footage in the Korengal Valley in 2007 and 2008 during a combined 10 trips to the country. "This is war, full stop," reads website prose above their directors' statement about the film.

It isn't.

Junger and Hetherington may know something about Afghanistan, a good deal about combat, and even more about modern American troops, but there's precious little evidence in *Restrepo* that — despite the title of Junger's book — they know the true face of war.

War on Your Doorstep

Earlier this year, Junger reviewed a new Vietnam War novel, veteran Karl Marlantes's *Matterhorn*, for the New York Times Book Review. In a glowing front-page appraisal, he

wrote, “Combat is not really what ‘Matterhorn’ is about; it is about war. And in Marlantes’s hands, war is a confusing and rich world where some men die heroically, others die because of bureaucratic stupidity, and a few are deliberately killed by platoon-mates bearing a grudge.” Analyzing Junger’s misreading of Matterhorn helps to unlock his misconceptions about war and explains the problems that dog his otherwise cinematically-pleasing, and in some ways useful, film.

Millions of Vietnamese were [killed](#) and [wounded](#) over the course of what the Vietnamese call the “American War” in Southeast Asia. About two million of those dead were Vietnamese civilians. They were blown to pieces by artillery, blasted by bombs, and massacred in hamlets and villages like [My Lai](#), [Son Thang](#), [Thanh Phong](#), and [Le Bac](#), in huge swaths of the [Mekong Delta](#), and in little unnamed enclaves like [one](#) in Quang Nam Province. Matterhorn touches on none of this. Marlantes focuses tightly on a small unit of Americans in a remote location surrounded by armed enemy troops — an episode that, while pitch perfect in depiction, represents only a sliver of a fraction of the conflict that was the Vietnam War.

It’s not surprising that this view of war appealed to Junger. In Restrepo, it’s his vision of war, too.

Restrepo’s repeated tight shots on the faces of earnest young American soldiers are the perfect metaphor for what’s lacking in the film and what makes it almost useless for telling us anything of note about the real war in Afghanistan. Only during wide shots in Restrepo do we catch fleeting glimpses of that real war.

In the opening scenes, shot from an armored vehicle (before an improvised explosive device halts a U.S. Army convoy), we catch sight of Afghan families in a village. When the camera pans across the Korengal Valley, we see simple homes on the hillsides. When men from Battle Company head to a house they targeted for an air strike and see dead locals and wounded children, when we see grainy footage of a farm family or watch a young lieutenant, a foreigner in a foreign land, intimidating and interrogating an even younger goat herder (whose hands he deems to be too clean to really belong to a goat herder) — here is the real war. And here are the people Junger and Hetherington should have embedded with if they wanted to learn — and wanted to teach us — what American war is really all about.

Few Americans born after the Civil War know much about war. Real war. War that seeks you out. War that arrives on your doorstep — not once in a blue moon, but once a month or a week or a day. The ever-present fear that just when you’re at the furthest point in your fields, just when you’re most exposed, most alone, most vulnerable, it will come roaring into your world.

Those Americans who have gone to war since the 1870s — soldiers or civilians — have been mostly combat tourists, even those who spent many tours under arms or with pen (or computer) in hand reporting from war zones. The troops among them, even the draftees or not-so-volunteers of past wars, always had a choice — be it fleeing the country or going to prison. They never had to contemplate living out a significant part of their life in a basement bomb shelter or worry about scrambling out of it before a foreign soldier tossed in a grenade. They never had to go through the daily dance with doom, the sense of fear and powerlessness that comes when foreign troops and foreign technology hold the power of life and death over your village, your home, each and every day.

The ordinary people whom U.S. troops have exposed to decades of war and occupation, death and destruction, uncertainty, fear, and suffering — in places like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Iraq, and Afghanistan — have had no such choice. They had no place else to go and no way to get there, unless as exiles and refugees in their own land or neighboring ones. They have instead been forced to live with the ever-present uncertainty that comes from having culturally strange, oddly attired, heavily armed American teenagers roaming their country, killing their countrymen, invading their homes, arresting their sons, and shouting incomprehensible commands laced with the word “fuck” or derivations thereof.

Since World War I, it’s been civilians who have most often borne the disproportionate brunt of modern warfare. It’s been ordinary people who have lived with war day after day. In Restrepo such people — Afghan elders seeking information on someone the Americans detained, villagers seeking compensation for an injured cow the Americans butchered into fresh steaks, and a man who angrily asks the Americans and their translator to point out the Taliban among civilians killed by a U.S. air strike — are just supporting characters or extras.

“[W]e did not interview Afghans,” Junger and Hetherington write in their directors’ statement. These are, however, precisely the people who know the most about war. And somehow I can’t believe Junger doesn’t intuitively know this. Surely it stands to reason that Afghan civilians in the Korengal Valley and elsewhere — some of whom have lived through the Soviet occupation, the bloody civil war of the early 1990s that saw the Taliban take power, and now almost a decade of American and allied foreign occupation — have a better understanding of war than any of Junger’s corn-fed twenty-somethings who are combat tourists for about a year at a time (even if they serve multiple tours of duty).

War in the Dark

This critical local knowledge, all but missing from Restrepo, is driven home in footage from a [PBS Frontline report](#) in which one of Restrepo’s “stars,” Captain Dan Kearney, speaks to an Afghan elder, Haji Zalwar Khan, in the Korengal Valley in July 2008. It’s around the time Restrepo ends, just as Kearney is about to hand-off his command to another American officer-cum-war-tourist.

“You people shoot at least one house a day. Last night you shot a house in Kandalay,” says Khan. In response, Kearney offers a visibly skeptical smile and predictable excuses.

“You people are like lightning when you strike a house, you kill everything inside,” Khan continues. Later, when Frontline correspondent Elizabeth Rubin is able to talk to him alone, the elder tells her that the conflict will end when the Americans depart. “When they leave there will be no fighting,” he assures her. “The insurgents exist to fight the Americans.”

Perhaps it’s only natural that Junger is focused (or perhaps the more appropriate word would be fixated) not on Afghans wounded or killed in their own homes, or even guerillas seeking to expel the foreign occupiers from the valley, but on the young volunteers fighting the U.S. war there. They are a tiny, self-selected minority of Americans whom the government has called upon again and again to serve in its long-festering post-9/11 occupations. And presumably for reasons ranging from patriotism to a lack of other prospects, these mostly baby-faced young men — there are no female troops in the unit — volunteered to kill on someone else’s orders for yet others’ reasons. Such people are not uninteresting.

For an American audience, they, and their suffering, provide the easiest entree into the

Afghan war zone. They also offer the easiest access for Junger and Hetherington. The young troops naturally elicit sympathy because they are besieged in the Korengal Valley and suffer hardships. (Albeit normally not hardships approaching the severity of those Afghans experience.) In addition, of course, Junger speaks their language, hails from their country, and understands their cultural references. He gets them.

Even in an American context, what he doesn't get, the soldiers he can't understand, are those who made up the working-class force that the U.S. fielded in Vietnam. That military was not a would-be warrior elite for whom "expeditionary" soldiering was just another job choice. It was instead a *mélange* of earnest volunteers, not unlike the men in Restrepo, along with large numbers of draftees and draft-induced enlistees most of whom weren't actively seeking the life of foreign occupiers and weren't particularly interested in endlessly garrisoning far-off lands where locals sought to kill them.

In his review of Marlantes's *Matterhorn*, Junger confesses:

"For a reporter who has covered the military in its current incarnation, the events recounted in this book are so brutal and costly that they seem to belong not just to another time but to another country. Soldiers openly contemplate killing their commanders. They die by the dozen on useless missions designed primarily to help the careers of those above them. The wounded are unhooked from IV bags and left to die because others, required for battle, are growing woozy from dehydration and have been ordered to drink the precious fluid. Almost every page contains some example of military callousness or incompetence that would be virtually inconceivable today, and I found myself wondering whether the book was intended as an indictment of war in general or a demonstration of just how far this nation has come in the last 40 years."

As the American War in Vietnam staggered to a close, U.S. troops were in an open state of rebellion. Fraggings — attacks on commanders (often by fragmentation grenade) — were rising, so was the escape into drug use. Troops bucked orders, mutinied, and regularly undertook "search and evade" missions, holing up in safe spots while calling in false coordinates.

AWOLs and desertions went through the roof. During World War II, Marine Corps desertion rates peaked at 8.8 per 1,000 in 1943. In 1972, the last full year of U.S. combat in Vietnam, the Marines had a desertion rate of 65.3 per 1,000. And precious few Marines were even in Vietnam at that point. AWOL rates were also staggering — 166.4 per 1,000 for the much more numerous Army and 170 per 1,000 for the Marines. In a widely-read 1971 *Armed Forces Journal* article, retired Colonel Robert D. Heinl, Jr., wrote, "By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state of approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near-mutinious."

It didn't take rocket-scientists to figure out that you couldn't conduct long-term, wheel-spinning occupations in distant lands with a military like that. And so the long-occupation-friendly all-volunteer force that Junger has come to know was born. That he has such a hard time understanding the citizen-soldier response to the American lost cause in Vietnam essentially ensures that the civilian story of war, especially that of alien civilians in a distant land, would evade his understanding. This is what makes the relative isolation of the unit he deals with in Restrepo so useful, even comfortable for him as he assesses a very American version of what war is all about.

By 1969, it was apparent where the Vietnam War was going and, increasingly, soldiers balked at the prospect of being the last man to die for their country in a disastrous war. While it turned out that about 15,000 Americans would die in Vietnam from 1969 to 1971 (almost as many as had died from 1965 to 1967), the troops were increasingly angry about it.

Body armor, drone warfare, ultra-rapid medevacs, and a host of other technological innovations, not to mention battling tiny numbers of relatively weak, ill-armed, and generally unpopular guerillas, has meant that Junger's new model military can fight its wars with minimal American casualties and, so far, less upset at home (or even perhaps in the field). Today, the numbers of dead Americans like Juan S. Restrepo, the medic for whom the outpost in Junger's film was named, remain relatively few compared, at least, to Vietnam. Just over 1,100 U.S. troops have died in and around Afghanistan since 2001.

On the other hand, who knows how many Afghan civilians have died over that span, thanks to everything from [insurgent IEDs](#), suicide attacks, and [beheadings](#) to [U.S. air strikes](#), special operations forces' [night raids](#), and [road checkpoint shootings](#), not to speak of every other hardship the American war in Afghanistan has unleashed, exacerbated, or intensified? Who knows their stories? Who has documented their unending suffering? Few have bothered. Few, if any, have risked their own lives to chronicle day-to-day life for months on end in embattled Afghan villages. Yet it's there, not in some isolated American outpost, that you would find the real story of war to film. In the place of such a work, we have Restrepo.

Even an all-volunteer army will eventually collapse if pushed too far for too long. Soldiers will eventually slip, if not explode, into revolt or at least will begin to evade orders, but the prospect looks unlikely any time soon for the U.S. military. Unlike Afghan civilians, U.S. troops go home or at least leave the combat zone after their tours of duty. And if most Americans don't necessarily give them much thought much of the time, they evidently have no problem paying them to make war, or engaging in effortless tributes to them, like rising at baseball games for a seventh-inning stretch salute.

In what passes for a poignant scene in Restrepo, Captain Kearney addresses his troops after a sister unit takes uncharacteristically heavy casualties. He says that they can take a few moments to mourn, but then it's time to get back into the fight. It's time for pay-back, time to make the enemy feel the way they're feeling. He then gives his men time for prayer.

If Kearney ever called his troops together and set aside a moment for prayer in memory of the civilians they killed or wounded, Junger and Hetherington missed it, or chose not to include it. Most likely, it never happened. And most likely, Americans who see Restrepo won't find that odd at all. Nor will they think it cold, insensitive, or prejudiced to privilege American lives over those of Afghans. After all, according to Junger, "military callousness" has gone the way of America's Vietnam-vintage F-4 Phantom fighter-bomber.

If Americans care only sparingly for their paid, professional soldiers — the ones A.O. Scott says deserve 90 minutes of our time — they care even less about Afghan civilians. That's why they don't understand war. And that's why they'll think that the essence of war is what they're seeing as they sit in the dark and watch Restrepo.

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