

Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome Narrative: Human Rights, the Nayirah Testimony, and the Gulf War

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On December 10, 1990, with four hundred thousand American soldiers readied for war along the Saudi–Kuwaiti border, George H. W. Bush issued a presidential proclamation designating December 10 as Human Rights Day. First recognized in 1949 by Harry Truman, Human Rights Day commemorates the UN General Assembly’s signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since Truman, acknowledging Human Rights Day with a proclamation has been a routine event every December for the sitting president. With a war on the horizon, Bush took the proclamation as an opportunity to situate the looming Gulf War in a human rights context. “In a world where human rights are routinely denied in too many lands,” he observed, “nowhere is that situation more tragic and more urgent today than in Kuwait.” Listing the atrocities reportedly committed by Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait, Bush concluded, “As long as such assaults occur, as long as inhumane regimes deny basic human rights, our work is not done.”¹ The Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait was not merely a threat to Kuwaiti sovereignty but also, Bush alleged, a threat to the sanctity of human rights everywhere. Americans could not feel secure in their own liberal rights until these rights were restored to the citizens of this small, oil-rich state in the Persian Gulf. Thus, the United States’ intervention in the Middle East was not really a war but, as Bush continually stressed that fall and winter, a unified “stand in defense of peace and freedom.”²

Though more commonly associated with the Clinton administration’s use of force in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, humanitarianism also centrally informed the Gulf War—a war that, while remembered for its association with live television and oil, laid the groundwork for a decade of “one-world” humanitarian war-making. This new rationale for waging war necessitated rewriting the story of the Vietnam War for a post–Cold War era. Days after declaring Kuwait liberated, at a meeting of the conservative American Legislative

Exchange Council, Bush clarified what he viewed as the broader significance of the US-led coalition's war. "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all," he told the room of state legislators.³ Diagnosed a decade earlier by Ronald Reagan, the Vietnam syndrome names Americans' unwillingness to intervene militarily after Vietnam and their misguided belief, in Reagan's assessment, that they were "aggressors bent on imperialistic conquests" in Southeast Asia. This story needed to be revised, Reagan contended; Vietnam should instead be remembered as a "noble cause" in which "a small country newly free from colonial rule sought our help in establishing self-rule and the means of self-defense against a totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest."⁴ He argued that, for the United States to reestablish itself as a virtuous actor in the world, it needed to revise the cultural narrative of the war in Southeast Asia. Bush made the same connection when he declared the Vietnam syndrome "kicked." He recognized that kicking the Vietnam syndrome meant *kicking the Vietnam syndrome narrative*. The story told in cultural and media narratives about the war in Southeast Asia had a dramatic effect on the meaning Americans ascribed to the state's use of military force. Like Reagan before him, Bush saw the need to revise that story and restore the United States' authority as the defender of liberal humanity from colonial and racial rule.

Bush's success in defining the Gulf War as a "noble cause" was due in part to his ability to cast the war within the discourse of international human rights. The end of the Cold War was received by American lawmakers on the right and the left as evidence of the universality of liberal democracy. With the Soviet Union on the verge of dissolution, they imagined an undivided post-Cold War world modeled on the American ideals of free markets and civil liberties. Francis Fukuyama had, by this time, announced the end of history—declaring liberal democracy to be the highest achievement and final form of human government—and Bush was listening.⁵ With the decline of Soviet communism, his administration envisioned a dawning future in which ideological conflict gave way to a united international community committed to free markets, democratic governance, and individual freedoms. It imagined an era in which there would be universal consent to the worldview of the United States and its Western democratic allies. Bush considered the Gulf War to be a "rare opportunity" to achieve a post-Cold War consensus in which, as he told Congress that fall, "the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle."⁶ Though not naming Vietnam in his address—indeed, he went to lengths *not* to name it—Bush suggested that the United States, disoriented by an ideological struggle with communism, had lost its way in the "jungle" of Southeast Asia. But the

decline of Soviet communism offered the nation a renewed and clarified sense of purpose. The international community could now unite around the “rule of law,” a legal order grounded in the discourse of liberal human rights. Bush articulated his new world order as a conclusive ending to the Vietnam War and the long Cold War, but he also recognized it as the beginning of a new era in which military power and human rights converged, masking the violence carried out by the humanitarian state.

But most Americans remember the Gulf War for the orchestrated way in which television media covered it. CNN televised the conflict around the clock. Americans could watch recordings of bombing runs and missile strikes taken by cameras embedded in the munitions themselves, recordings that tended to show more hits than misses. The footage contributed to the idea that American viewers had access to uncensored knowledge of the war and that, with the introduction of GPS-guided missiles, coalition forces were waging a “clean” war against noncivilian infrastructural targets. Such Gulf War narratives as Anthony Swofford’s memoir *Jarhead* (2003) and Jonathan Demme’s remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004) centrally address how military-regulated media carefully constructed the conflict in the interest of subduing the kind of antiwar movement that—Bush and his advisers believed—had derailed the war in Southeast Asia. Cultural studies scholars have shown how the Bush administration, with the assistance of television media, strove to render the Gulf War as the inverse of the Vietnam War. As Susan Jeffords and Lauren Rabinovitz write, “For the United States to wage a new war, the public memory of the old war would have to be overturned or erased.”⁷ But the architects of the war did not, I argue, merely overturn or erase the unsettling cultural memory of the Vietnam War—through the Weinberger–Powell doctrine’s emphasis on the execution of overwhelming force and a swift, strategic exit—but also integrated it into the emergent discourse of humanitarian war-making. Political speeches, human rights testimony, and Hollywood films reveal how the Bush administration created a left–right consensus behind a war in the Persian Gulf by channeling the kind of humanitarian affect associated with the antiwar movement of the 1960s. The stakes of recognizing the Gulf War as a humanitarian war are high because doing so reveals how the post–Cold War state militarized liberal-antiwar discourse and thus formed a martial bridge from the Vietnam War to the “interregnum” of the 1990s.

This essay traces the emergence of human rights as an instrument of war at the end of the Cold War. The convergence of humanitarianism and militarism allowed the United States to reassert itself as a righteous force in the world

by recasting its wars as a defense against human rights abusers. With Bush at first struggling to tell a coherent story about the state's involvement in the Persian Gulf, a fifteen-year-old Kuwaiti girl named Nayirah showed him the high road to war. Her infamous testimony before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, in October 1990, included the widely reported—and, in the end, fictitious—allegation that Iraqi soldiers had taken infants from incubators “and left the children to die on the cold floor.”⁸ Though invented, her resonant account of Iraqi brutality was crucial in authorizing the state's own story of a humanitarian crusade in the Middle East. This story created an enduring obstacle for such liberal-antiwar films as David O. Russell's *Three Kings* (1999) and Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog* (1997). While critical of the war's constructedness as a media event, Russell's and Levinson's films are more ambivalent about how human rights discourse fits into, and indeed contains, that criticism. When Bush constructed a resolution to Vietnam by reclaiming it as a noble cause—by kicking the Vietnam syndrome—he did so by narratively assimilating it into a new stage of permanent war that connected the end of the Cold War to the beginning of the war on terror. Yet, when the home video of white LAPD officers beating an unarmed Rodney King surfaced days after the ceasefire, it unsettled the United States' newfound humanitarian ethic and revealed its selective acknowledgment, “conferral,” and denial of universal rights through state violence.

Humanitarian War in the Interregnum

The Gulf War was not the first time the United States had marshaled humanitarianism as a rationale for war. When the UN General Assembly signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the Truman administration was in the middle of forming a new centralized military and intelligence infrastructure that, though motivated by Soviet communism and the Chinese Civil War, sought to articulate the United States as a defender of human rights the world over. When Truman outlined his vision for “a single Department of National Defense” in his 1947 State of the Union address, he stressed that “national security does not consist only of an army, a navy, and an air force” but also rests on “civil liberties and human freedoms” and the attainment of “collective security for all mankind.”⁹ The national security state and human rights were intertwined from the start. And, throughout the Cold War, state officials cast communists as human rights abusers and human rights abusers as communists. Truman modeled this marriage of anticommunism and humani-

tarianism during the Korean War by describing the nation's enemy not as a sovereign state but as "Communist slavery."¹⁰ The war on the Korean Peninsula inaugurated an age of Cold War humanitarianism that, like earlier iterations of colonial liberalism, as Lisa Lowe has observed, wielded universalism as an instrument of racial inclusion, exclusion, and assimilation.¹¹

But human rights did not move out of the shadow of anticommunism and become a dominant state formation in the United States until after the military defeat in Vietnam. That war marked the breakdown of containment as a framework for understanding the world and the role of military force in remaking it. Americans were no longer willing to believe that installing anticommunist governments in distant countries was critical either to national security or to the benefit of those living under these governments. The United States needed a new way of seeing itself in the world to which Americans as well as Asians, Africans, and Eastern Europeans might consent. Over the next two decades, human rights, decoupled from anticommunism, moved to the center of the national security establishment. And while humanitarian militarism has been associated with the ensuing wars in the Balkans, the Gulf War launched this new era through a careful revision and assimilation (rather than erasure) of the cultural narrative of the war in Southeast Asia. Three years after the end of the Vietnam War, commemorating the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Jimmy Carter declared human rights to be "the soul of our foreign policy."¹² Though dismissed by Reagan as a naive understanding of a dangerous world, Carter's words would have an enduring effect. And, over time, Vietnam was transformed into a testament to rather than a negation of the nation's commitment to human rights.

Twelve years after Carter declared the United States a humanitarian state, as Bush readied the country for a new war, Americans saw Vietnam as a war that had been ended at least in part by the humanitarian sentiment of those watching on television at home. This revisionist account of the Vietnam War redeemed the military defeat as a moral success. After the war in Southeast Asia, as Neda Atanasoski observes, "documentaries and photographs depicting the horrors of war allowed U.S. audiences to experience outrage at having caused the suffering of Vietnamese women, children, and civilians, affirming the ability of U.S. citizens to distinguish right from wrong."¹³ Americans' ability to see such photographs as Eddie Adams's "Saigon Execution" (1968) and Nick Ut's "Napalm Girl" (1972) as evidence of the nation's self-reckoning necessitated that they be restaged as part of a forward-looking story of *American* trauma and rehabilitation.¹⁴ The irony is that cultural criticisms of the United States'

death dealing in Southeast Asia—intended to elicit anger and humanitarian affect from American civilians—formed the foundation of future wars, beginning with Bush’s war in the Persian Gulf.

The figure of the Vietnamese refugee has been at the center of this humanitarian-minded rehabilitation of the Vietnam War. Reagan himself recognized the usefulness of the refugee narrative to rationalizing war as a human good, seeing the arrival of “boat people” from Southeast Asia as evidence of the rightness of the war fought there and the need to “do a better job of exporting Americanism” in the future.¹⁵ When he declared the Vietnam War a noble cause, Reagan asked, how could it not be when so many Vietnamese had fled their communist-governed homeland for the shores of the liberal-democratic United States? As Yen Le Espiritu argues, the success of some Vietnamese refugees has been used to grant the United States a kind of retroactive “win” in Southeast Asia. Through the rehearsal of what she calls the “good refugee” narrative,” defenders of the war effort suggest that it was worth it in the end because thousands of Vietnamese were “saved” from an illiberal social world by the benevolence of the United States.¹⁶ The figure of the successful Vietnamese refugee is assumed to validate the state’s role as an advocate for human rights and to serve as an illustration of what Vietnamese life would look like today if the United States had seen the war through as a humanitarian cause. This narrative reveals how humanitarianism has functioned as an instrument of official liberal antiracism by which the state distinguishes “legitimate,” assimilable forms of difference (the good refugee) from illegitimate, unassimilable forms (the unconverted) while masking its role in forming new racial categories and divisions by articulating them in the deracinated language of beliefs and behaviors (the human rights abuser).

When Bush set out to kick the Vietnam syndrome in the Persian Gulf, state actors, activists, writers, and filmmakers had already been struggling to reshape the cultural memory of the war for more than a decade through strategic representations of Southeast Asian refugees in the United States, POW/MIA activism, Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the “noble grunt” films of the late 1980s.¹⁷ Throughout his administration, Reagan and his allies refocused Americans’ attention on the formally depoliticized practice of commemorating the sacrifices of its veterans in Southeast Asia, a practice that, as Patrick Hagopian writes, hid “an irreducibly political objective, the reforging of national unity damaged by the war.”¹⁸ While much of the memory work of the Reagan era focused on recentering and rehabilitating the traumatized white American veteran, the Bush administration extended that project in the

Persian Gulf by reclaiming the soldier as a liberal-humanitarian actor capable of at last rescuing Vietnam by liberating Kuwait. This rescue narrative was built out of an ahistorical account of Vietnamese refugees “taken in” by the United States and the humanitarian ethic of an earlier generation of war resisters. The state reasserted itself as a defender of human rights through testaments to the humanitarian crises *it had created* in Southeast Asia—obscuring these histories in the act of retelling them.

For Fukuyama, Bush, and others, the end of the Cold War meant that liberal democracy had won out. Everyone was (or would be) a liberal now, and the Gulf War signaled the commencement of this new world order. When asked if by declaring an end to the Vietnam syndrome he was forecasting a new era of military interventionism, Bush contended that the threat of war alone would be enough to force nonaligned states to conform to liberal-democratic internationalism in the wake of the US-led coalition’s dominant showing in the Persian Gulf. “I think when we say something that is objectively correct,” he stated, “like don’t take over a neighbor or you’re going to bear some responsibility, people are going to listen because I think out of all this will [come] a reestablished credibility for the United States.”¹⁹ Unlike in Vietnam, he recognized, there would no longer be an ideological counterweight (communism) to challenge Americans’ certainty in the goodness of its government’s wars. Bush imagined a world where every nation subscribed to his government’s account of what was “objectively correct,” whether by choice or by the threat of military force.

Bush’s conviction that the United States had “reestablished” its control of objectivity demonstrates how the state has legitimized its wars through the assumed universality of liberal humanitarianism. After World War II, amid growing antiracist and anticolonial movements, the United States faced the challenge of exercising influence in the former colonies of Asia without looking—to Asians and Americans—like yet another colonial state seeking to extract value from the continent’s labor, land, and resources. Liberal internationalists therefore turned to anticommunism and human rights. Chandan Reddy has theorized such associations of state violence with social liberation as a “freedom with violence” by which the modern state claims “a monopoly on legitimate violence” by forging “the conditions for the universalization of a specific expression of reason or rationality.”²⁰ The United States has, in other words, designated itself an arbiter of legitimate violence by advancing its own theory of rationality (liberalism) as the only form of rational thought. The state maintains the right to deem any act of violence committed by an illiberal state or nonstate actor as illegitimate and criminal while assuming its own

violence against such actors to have a humanizing effect by drawing them into the United States' liberal order. The Vietnam War threw the then-dominant liberal project of anticommunist-humanitarian militarism into crisis, afflicting the country, as Reagan diagnosed it, with a lack of conviction in its rightness. With the decline of Soviet communism, Bush seized the Gulf War as a way to reclaim the governance of universal rationality by shedding anticommunism and reframing the war in Southeast Asia as a humanitarian success that should have, had the country maintained its resolve, been a military one as well. Recognizing the Gulf War as the first humanitarian war (minus anticommunism) reveals the durability of human rights as an instrument of war and a means of its historical revision. It illuminates how, in Randall Williams's words, "the contemporary human rights regime obscures the dialectic between (imperial) violence and (international) law"²¹—how governing the "objectively correct" liberal legal order facilitates the use of virtuous force.

Yet the Gulf War coincided with the beginning of a decade that is remembered as an interregnum between the Cold War and the counterterror wars. Taking a closer look at the humanitarian discourse through which the Gulf War was rationalized tells a different story. Bush's ecstatic remark that his administration had "kicked the Vietnam syndrome" in the Persian Gulf was a revealing narrative act that constructed an end to one war by launching a new one. Shifting the national security state's focus from the containment of communists to one-world humanitarianism, he regarded the liberation of Kuwait from alleged human rights abusers to be the United States' obligation as the leader of the free world, a title confirmed, in his mind, by the downfall of the Soviet Union. This was an imaginative ending to the Vietnam War, but it was also a new beginning because the union of human rights and warfare was authorized in part by the humanitarian feeling of the antiwar movement that had rebelled against the earlier war. The militarization of human rights is the link that binds the war in Southeast Asia to a new era of war-making, and it was narratively facilitated by such state-sanctioned storytelling as that of the Nayirah testimony. Her orchestrated words show the interregnum to be part of, rather than a break from, an age of permanent war that stretches from the formation of the national security state into the twenty-first century.

The Nayirah Testimony and the High Road to War

The Gulf War was not always a battle for humanity. On the morning of August 2, 1990, after learning that the Iraqi Army had invaded and occupied Kuwait,

Bush was unsure what to tell Americans about his administration's intentions in the Persian Gulf. He did not know at the time whether the use of military force would be needed, but he wanted to have that choice available. This, he knew, would mean convincing Americans—most of whom had never heard of Kuwait—that intervening in the region was vital to the United States' interests. But, for the next two months, Bush struggled to tell a coherent story about the events in the Persian Gulf and the United States' relation to them. At first, he stressed that allowing Iraq to control so much of the world's oil reserves could destabilize the region and, in turn, endanger the security of the United States. With Kuwait's oil wells, the Hussein government would govern a fifth of known oil resources and, as Bush told Congress, have "the economic and military power, as well as the arrogance, to intimidate and coerce its neighbors—neighbors who control the lion's share of the world's remaining oil reserves."²² He made the case that the United States could not run the risk of letting Saddam Hussein overrun Saudi Arabia and gain access to the "lion's share" of a resource on which the United States depended.

But going to war for oil did not resonate with Americans, who, by early October, remained wary of a large-scale war in the Persian Gulf.²³ In these first months, the Bush administration came across as if it were running for office—framing the conflict in terms of the domestic economy—rather than readying the nation for war. The president was going to great lengths to avoid any mention of the Vietnam War, and he had not yet used human rights as a call to arms. Though Bush and his team continued to cite rising oil costs as a reason for intervening in Kuwait throughout the fall and winter, it was clear that gas prices alone could not convince Americans of the necessity of war. And the idea that the state was waging war for oil became ammunition for antiwar activists such as June Jordan, who, at an event in Hayward, California, accused the president of "lusting after oil and power" and inviting Americans to indulge in "the perversions of kicking ass, preferably on TV."²⁴ Bush did not discover the high road to war until a Kuwaiti girl named Nayirah gave him a focusing event on which to build a new story about the war in the Persian Gulf.

Two months after the invasion of Kuwait, on October 10, the Congressional Human Rights Caucus held a hearing on alleged human rights abuses committed by the invading Iraqi soldiers. Founded and cochaired by congressmen Tom Lantos, a California Democrat, and John Edward Porter, an Illinois Republican, the Human Rights Caucus is a loose association rather than a formal committee of Congress. So, while it conducts itself much like a committee would, it does not necessitate that testimony be delivered under

oath, meaning witnesses are not vulnerable to legal action should they lie. Lantos and Porter heard testimony from many witnesses and human rights advocates that day, but no testimony was as moving as that given by Nayirah, a fifteen-year-old Kuwaiti girl who did not reveal her identity, the congressmen said, for fear of inviting retaliations against her family. Before the caucus and a television audience, Nayirah recalled how, in the second week after the invasion, she had been volunteering at the al-Addan hospital in Hadiya when it was ransacked by Iraqi soldiers. “I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns,” she testified, struggling to hold back tears. “They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators, and left the children to die on the cold floor.”²⁵ She went on to describe how the Iraqis had tortured her friend and burned entire neighborhoods, but the story of babies being removed from incubators was the one that everyone remembered, defining for Americans the brutality of the Iraqi Army.

After Nayirah had finished, Porter closed the hearing by noting that, in the caucus’s eight-year history, he had never heard “a record of inhumanity, brutality, and sadism [comparable with] the ones that the witnesses have given us today. I don’t know how the people of the civilized countries of this world can fail to do everything within their power to remove this scourge from the face of our Earth.”²⁶ That night, at a White House event, Bush told Porter that he had watched the caucus hearing on CNN and was shocked by what he had seen. Five days later, Bush told Nayirah’s incubator story at a Dallas fundraiser for gubernatorial candidate Clayton Williams, referring to Hussein for the first time as “Hitler revisited.”²⁷ He went on to cite the story at least six more times at events that fall. The war was no longer just about oil. It was also, Bush asserted, about saving babies from a Hitler-like menace.

Only after the war did Americans learn that Nayirah’s testimony was fabricated. Ten months after the ceasefire, the journalist John MacArthur revealed in a *New York Times* editorial that Nayirah was not your average Kuwaiti teenager. She was the daughter of the country’s ambassador to the United States, Saud Nasir al-Sabah, who had been sitting four seats down from her, unacknowledged, at the caucus hearing.²⁸ Nayirah never volunteered at the al-Addan hospital. She had visited only once and, during that visit, had not witnessed babies being taken from incubators by looting soldiers, because such an incident had never occurred. The incubator story was a myth that had been circulating among Kuwaitis in Britain and the United States since the late summer and treated as fact by the *Daily Telegraph* (London) and the *Los Angeles Times*. Nayirah’s decision to assume the story as her own was a result of

coaching by the public-relations firm Hill and Knowlton for its client Citizens for a Free Kuwait (CFK), a US-based organization bankrolled by the Kuwaiti government to advocate for the United States to militarily intervene on behalf of Kuwait. Acting under CFK's direction, Hill and Knowlton chose and advised the witnesses who testified during the Human Rights Caucus hearing.

At the hearing, Hill and Knowlton set out to tell an unambiguous story: Kuwait was an emerging democratic nation and an advocate for women's rights, while Hussein was a brutal dictator threatened by and striving to colonize liberal Kuwait. Nayirah was the ideal candidate through whom to communicate this message. Before the hearing, the firm instructed its witnesses on how to dress, and Nayirah wore an embroidered sweater with her long hair in a braid. She looked like any American teenager might, and by testifying on behalf of her country, she embodied Kuwait's alleged commitment to women's rights. Nayirah's American-style dress and manner attested to Kuwait's assimilation into the Western liberal-democratic order, whereas her testimony underscored that its invading neighbor could not be assimilated and indeed sought to destabilize that order. Under the coaching of Hill and Knowlton, Nayirah invited Americans to see their own government as the solution to the Hussein regime's illegitimate violence, its encroachment on women's rights and on the freedoms of ethnic and religious minorities. Hill and Knowlton constructed an imagined scenario in which the United States rescued assimilable, modern women from unassimilable, "backward" Muslim men.

The effectiveness of Nayirah's account of human rights abuses by the Iraqi Army did not go unnoticed by the Bush administration. Within days the president had begun referencing the incubator story at fund-raisers, rallies, and military bases across the country. At the Dallas event, for example, Bush described the "horrible tales" he had heard from Kuwaitis, all of which echoed testimony given before Lantos and Porter, and told of how "newborn babies [were being] thrown out of incubators and the incubators then shipped off to Baghdad." These atrocities, he remarked, were reminiscent of Nazi Germany. "But remember, when Hitler's war ended, there were the Nuremberg trials."²⁹ The president's words suggested that he had recognized what Hill and Knowlton had earlier discovered. To convince Americans of the need to intervene in the Middle East, he needed to foreground the moral stakes of the war. This meant telling a black-and-white story of an innocent victim (Kuwaiti children) and an unambiguous villain (Hussein). Bush's allusion to the Nuremberg trials, which established the tribunal as a basic instrument of international human rights law, reinforced the idea that what was at issue in the Persian Gulf was

the United States' authority to defend against human rights abuses. Newborn babies being thrown from incubators was the focalizing narrative on which he based his case.

While the Nayirah testimony may not have changed the course of the Gulf War, it introduced the military-humanitarian discourse by which the United States would rationalize further military occupations in the last decade of the twentieth century. This transition was achieved by connecting the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait not only to the Holocaust but also to the Vietnam War. The Human Rights Caucus hearing made Nayirah and the fictitious dead infants the symbolic victims of the conflict. The story of murdered babies and a refugee Asian girl summoned the visual legacies of the My Lai massacre and of Phan Thi Kim Phúc running from a "friendly fire" attack on her village. Like Ut's photograph of Phúc, Nayirah's words commanded attention through a form of direct address—visually in Ut's photo through Phúc's eye contact with the camera and narratively at the Human Rights Caucus hearing through the testimonial form. Though the Nayirah testimony was broadcast live on CNN and shown on other news channels in the following weeks, it never delivered an enduring visual icon in the mold of Robert Haeberle's My Lai photos or Ut's "Napalm Girl." Instead, it lived on as a story that, without its own visual material, drew on that of the war in Southeast Asia and the discourse of national "innocence lost" it signified in the United States—but with a new distribution of trauma, guilt, and virtue. This absence of a visual icon meant that the Nayirah testimony rewrote rather than negated the icons of the Vietnam War. It kicked the Vietnam syndrome narrative.

Yet, when Bush decided not to continue to Baghdad and oust the man he had labeled the new Hitler, he found himself facing the same criticism that he had earlier used to shame the antiwar Left. As Lloyd Gardner observes, when Hussein "suppressed rebelling Kurds and Shiites [following the ceasefire], the humanitarian argument went the other way."³⁰ For some humanitarian internationalists, Bush had not gone far enough. Among the president's critics, the conservative columnist William Safire scolded Bush in the *New York Times* for having "abandoned tens of thousands of Kurdish fighters to death and their families to starvation" and thus forfeiting the nation's "newfound pride . . . as a superpower that stands for the right."³¹ This is part of the reason that the Gulf War is remembered not as a humanitarian war but as a war waged for oil and staged on live television. When Bush refused to enter Baghdad—fearing a Vietnam-like entanglement—he lost control of the humanitarian story by which he had convinced Americans of the need to intervene. This *humani-*

tarian criticism of the Bush administration's *humanitarian* war is a source of confusion for the films made later that decade about the intervention in the Persian Gulf. While they treat Bush's good-versus-evil narrative as an object of satire, they struggle to address the rise of human rights as a basis for state violence at the end of the Cold War. The last decade of the twentieth century felt to many like an interregnum because of the humanitarian containment of liberal-antiwar discourse.

The Humanitarian Satire of Hollywood's Gulf War

The Gulf War has not attracted much attention from film studios. This has been attributed to the entertainment-oriented way in which CNN broadcast the war, giving audiences what felt like a forty-two-day, blow-by-blow military thriller. When asked in 1991 if he thought that the Gulf War would generate any enduring art, Robert Stone, the author of the Vietnam War novel *Dog Soldiers* (1974), admitted, "When I think of the cultural impact of the Persian Gulf War, what I end up with literally is commercials on CNN." Oliver Stone reflected, "In a sense, Tom Cruise already did the Persian Gulf War in *Top Gun*."³² This attitude suggests why Hollywood films about the Gulf War—*Courage under Fire* (1996), *Wag the Dog*, *Three Kings*, Demme's remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Jarhead* (2005)—tend to concentrate on how and to what ends the war was staged by the military and military-regulated media.

Among the most celebrated of such Gulf War films, Russell's *Three Kings* follows four American soldiers who, after the ceasefire, go in search of gold bullion that had been stolen from Kuwait during the invasion. They are tracked by a frustrated cable newswoman, Adriana Cruz (Nora Dunn). Constrained by military regulations, she recites clichés to her television audience. "They say you exorcised the ghosts of Vietnam with a clear moral imperative," she tells a crowd of soldiers, causing them to break into a rowdy rendition of Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA."³³ Yet, while the film challenges the military-media relations that allowed the war to look so sanitized on television, it also reinforces a belief in the military's role as an institution with the authority to defend human rights across the world. When the gold heist devolves into chaos, the Americans get entangled with a village of Iraqi Shia refugees and help them flee the country. The Americans' greed is overcome by the humanitarian obligation to rescue the villagers. And Russell's film comes to endorse the "clear moral imperative" that it had earlier established as an idea deserving of satire, condemning Bush's war on the basis that it had not lasted long enough to violently humanize the Middle East.

After the war, Bush was attacked from the right and the left for not entering Baghdad and overthrowing the Hussein regime, instead declaring a ceasefire and suggesting that Iraqis “set him aside” themselves.³⁴ The criticism that Bush instigated a rebellion and then abandoned the rebels to be crushed by Hussein resurfaces in *Three Kings*, a film released in the wake of the US-led NATO air strikes in Kosovo. Having located the Kuwaiti gold in a bunker outside Karbala, the Americans are ready to return to base when they witness the murder of a woman at the hands of the Iraqi Republican Guard. She had rebelled against the Hussein government, as Bush had advised, and dies begging for the Americans to defend her village. Her young daughter (Alia Shawkat), who wears casts on two broken arms, runs to her body. Acting on instinct, the Americans break the ceasefire and rescue the remaining villagers from the Guard. Later, the husband of the murdered woman, Amir Abdullah (Cliff Curtis), admonishes the Americans for stealing gold when he and other Iraqis are struggling to overthrow Hussein. “What good is [saving our lives] if you leave us here to be slaughtered, huh? The big army of democracy beats the ugly dictator and saves the rich Kuwaitis.” Making a case for why the Americans should escort them to the Iranian border, Amir confronts major Archie Gates (George Clooney): “You saw what happened to my wife. Look at my daughter.” The camera turns to Amir’s daughter, who sits with her broken arms held out and her eyes wide. Moments later, Archie agrees to Amir’s demands. Though the Americans had set out to make themselves rich by stealing Kuwaiti gold, once they witness the civilians’ suffering, they are transformed into human rights crusaders. They are reluctant to take on this role, but Amir’s monologue casts the Americans as invited guests rather than self-interested invaders in his country. Questioning the coalition’s rationale for saving “the rich Kuwaitis,” he asks Archie to make good on the promise of humanitarian war by seeing the refugees to the border.

Through Archie, the viewer is invited to gaze at the suffering of the girl. Amir reminds him that his daughter’s mother was killed earlier that day and that, by abandoning them to Hussein’s men, the Americans would be sentencing her to death, too. This use of a mother and her child to elicit humanitarian affect is a familiar convention of human rights visual activism that Wendy Kozol has theorized as the militarization of transnational motherhood. The focus on a mother and her child in humanitarian visual culture, she writes, mobilizes “supposedly universal ideals about gender, maternal care, vulnerability, and innocence” meant to “invite the spectator to recognize the humanity, not the ethnic difference, of these women and children.”³⁵ Though the mother takes a

leading role in the villagers' resistance—before being shot by the Guard—the negotiation of the meaning of her death and her daughter's life are conducted by two men, with the white American officer deciding the value of their lives. The scene illustrates why humanitarian war-making was able to achieve broad-based consent at the end of the Cold War. Politicians embraced humanitarianism as a way to depoliticize war. They reframed war as a moral cause and an effort to mediate spaces of indiscriminate violence rather than a political struggle conditioned by history, debt, race, religion, and coloniality. Criminalizing the Hussein government's behavior allowed the Bush administration to cast the coalition's occupation as an effort to introduce order to a disordered part of the world rather than a war waged to convert an existing order to a new one more amenable to American interests.

The American characters' actions in *Three Kings* are not unlike those taken by the Bush administration after the Gulf War, when it established refugee settlements for ethnic Kurds along the Turkish border and instituted no-fly zones in the northern and southern regions to defend the country's disenfranchised Kurdish and Shia communities. These no-fly zones were maintained for seven years. Announcing the establishment of the refugee settlements, Bush drew on the language of human rights visual activism, stating, "No one can see the pictures or hear the accounts of this human suffering—men, women, and most painfully of all, innocent children—and not be deeply moved."³⁶ He understood the usefulness of humanitarian affect as a way to justify the United States' military settlement in the Middle East and used the figure of the refugee to recast the Gulf War as a moral crusade. Though critical of the Bush administration's conduct in the Middle East, Russell's film arrives at the same conclusion, endorsing the military's intervention in the region as a humanitarian act that transcends all other considerations.

But the film does suggest the uneven distribution of "universal" human rights by intimating a connection between the Gulf War and antiblack racism in the United States. When Archie, Troy Barlow (Mark Wahlberg), and Chief Elgin (Ice Cube) first enter the bunker where the gold is hidden, they find Iraqi soldiers reveling in consumer goods stolen from Kuwait. Iraqi captain Said (Saïd Taghmaoui), who we later learn had been trained by American advisers during the Iran–Iraq War, is seated on a recliner watching the video recording of white LAPD officers beating Rodney King. The camera lingers on the television screen for a moment, and Chief, a black staff sergeant, registers what Said is watching. Two days after Bush had declared the Vietnam syndrome kicked, on March 3, 1991, King was tased and beaten on the Foothill Freeway in the San

Fernando Valley. The incident was filmed by George Holliday, a local resident who later shared the video with a regional news station. Holliday's footage became a media sensation and incited outrage across the country.

Whereas the media coverage of the Gulf War had rendered it a "clean" war by removing bodily violence from the visual field, the out-of-focus amateur video of the King beating reintroduced that violence. It embodied the ideological limit of Bush's new world order and highlighted the racial divisions aggravated and created by wars waged to selectively defend and "confer" liberal rights—wars that cut across national borders. Having watched the LAPD officers beat an unarmed black man, Said, once an ally to the United States and now its sworn enemy, recognizes the falseness of the state's claim to be defending human rights in Kuwait and elsewhere. Chief's awareness of what Said is watching acknowledges, for a moment, the continuities between race-making in Los Angeles and war-making in Baghdad. And it alludes to the actor Ice Cube's vocal criticism of police brutality against black men as a member of the rap group NWA and in his solo music career. (He famously wrote "Fuck tha Police" [1988] for NWA.) While subscribing to the humanitarian argument for the war in the Persian Gulf, Russell's film introduces an alternative account of the liberal state that reconnects race and racialization to the project of humanitarian universalism.

Whereas Russell's film endeavors to get underneath the sanitized media coverage of the war, Levinson's *Wag the Dog* is a war film without war. After the president of the United States is accused of making advances on an underage girl, his communications adviser Conrad Brean (Robert De Niro), seeking to distract voters from the scandal, hires the famed filmmaker Stanley Motss (Dustin Hoffman) to construct a fake war with Albania. While Levinson's film became associated with Bill Clinton's handling of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, it is based on Larry Beinhart's Gulf War novel *American Hero* (1993), in which a fictional George Bush, concerned with his flagging ratings, arranges for a Hollywood director to stage the Gulf War. Like the novel on which it was based, *Wag the Dog* understands war as a made-for-television event. Conrad and Stanley see the war with Albania as merely one more story to be written and sold. And the best way to sell a war story at the end of the Cold War, they realize, is with human rights. The stakes of the war they invent are unclear. The only information they release is a studio-made video of a refugee girl fleeing from a terrorist-abetting regime. Americans must understand the military as antiracist and self-sacrificing, and Conrad and Stanley understand that the refugee is the ideal figure through whom to communicate the humanitarian

ethic of war. While it shines a critical light on how the state has militarized human rights, *Wag the Dog* refuses to see war as anything other than a benign media construct. Conrad may distract Americans from a sex scandal with an artificial war, but the idea of war as nothing but artifice distracts from the actual devastation caused by humanitarian violence.

Conrad and Stanley's ability to fabricate a war with Albania is founded on the idea that Americans ascribe meaning to their nation's wars based on the iconic images associated with those conflicts. Conrad reminds Stanley that for the average American the Gulf War was nothing but the CNN footage of "one smart bomb falling down the chimney."³⁷ Wars are remembered by their icons, he argues, and so the two filmmakers set out to define the icon by which the war in Albania will be remembered. They settle on an image of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed teenage girl—an actress named Tracy Lime (Kirsten Dunst)—fleeing from Albanian terrorists. Wearing a headscarf and a wool dress, Tracy is filmed in front of a blue screen with a bag of Tostitos. Studio technicians then transform the footage, substituting the blue screen for a burning village, adding sounds of screaming and gunfire, and inserting a white calico kitten where the Tostitos had been. The video does not clarify what has led to the violence in Albania. But Stanley insists that such details are irrelevant. As he observes before shooting, "Young girl in rubble. She was driven from her home by Albanian terrorists, okay? It's her we are mobilizing to defend." Stanley argues that citizens are convinced of the goodness of war not by abstract ideas but by a resonant individual story. Like Nayirah's account of Kuwaiti infants taken from their incubators, the refugee video reveals the degree to which a focalizing narrative may be used to circumscribe (and revise) the cultural memory of war.

The fabricated footage of Tracy fleeing a burning village draws on but also remakes the discourse of national "innocence lost" through which Americans understand the iconic image of Phúc running from a South Vietnamese bombing. With their studio-made video, Conrad and Stanley invite their viewers to return to Southeast Asia, reclaim the nation's durable sense of its own innocence, and rescue Phúc from an aggressor that is no longer their own military. The recasting of the United States as humanitarian rescuer, as I have argued, was a useful—and indeed necessary—revision to make at the beginning of the decade if Bush was to realize his vision of ushering in a new world order governed by universal human rights. The state needed to absolve itself of its own human rights abuses in Southeast Asia *and* establish itself as a steadfast defender against such abuses. That transformation was achieved

not through the substitution but through the narrative revision of the visual memory of the Vietnam War.

Bush's war also furthered a militarized "remasculinization" that began during the Reagan era. As such scholars as Susan Jeffords, Sylvia Chong, and George Lipsitz have observed, the cultural memory of the Vietnam War functioned as a vehicle to reclaim white masculinity in the post-civil rights era. And the Gulf War—through which that memory was in part renegotiated—reinscribed masculine values and restored patriarchal structures that had been "wounded" by the military defeat in Southeast Asia. Yet Bush's effort to transition the country from Reagan's hardline anticommunism to his own one-world humanitarianism also occasioned a shift in the meaning of masculinity at the end of the Cold War. Jeffords has shown how, unlike the "hard-body" masculinity of 1980s action-adventure heroes like John McClane and John Rambo, Bush "would struggle throughout his presidency to straddle the images of himself as a man who 'cares' about people and as a tough commander-in-chief."³⁸ This incoherence in his embodiment of masculine norms reflected the inconsistencies in the disembodied patriarchal formation that structured the war in the Persian Gulf. His administration imagined the United States as, at once, the father and policeman to the region. This had less to do with Bush as an individual, though, than with the national security state's uneven transition as it sought to rearticulate its role in the world after the decline of Soviet communism.

Levinson's film satirizes how the Bush administration tried to revise the state's image through stories of humanitarian crisis and liberation. But, unlike the Gulf War, Conrad and Stanley choose a light-skinned girl as the object of humanitarian rescue. When *Wag the Dog* was released in December 1997, the wars of the former Yugoslavia had been ongoing for close to a decade. During the US-led NATO occupation of Bosnia, American media situated Muslim Bosnians within the racial formation of whiteness. The Bosnian refugees shown on television and in news magazines were almost always light-skinned women and children. This allowed the United States to define itself through and against the Balkans, associating the region with a kind of racism from which the nation had, the media coverage suggested, long ago advanced. The United States and its NATO allies, as Atanasoski writes, "displaced ongoing racial anxieties by opposing their humanitarian presence in the Balkans to the premodern barbarism of 'ethnic cleansing,' for which the region came to be known."³⁹ Levinson's film reveals how the United States transferred its own racial violence onto the Balkans, as Atanasoski argues, but also, as I have suggested, onto the Hussein government in the first years of the decade. Beginning

in the Persian Gulf, the humanitarian wars of the 1990s rewrote the Vietnam War twice over, celebrating it as a moral achievement and then reassigning the violence committed by the United States to other regimes, whether Hussein, Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, or “Albanian terrorists.”

Wag the Dog embodies the virtues and shortcomings of satirizing the orchestrated media coverage of the Gulf War. It identifies how the Bush administration mobilized the discourse of human rights to create a left–right consensus in support of a war in the Middle East, a consensus that his Democratic successor, Clinton, would use in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo later that decade. But, in rendering human suffering as something staged by filmmakers, *Wag the Dog* distracts from the real military violence committed by the United States in the decade that followed the end of the Cold War. When Conrad tells Stanley that for most Americans the Gulf War was nothing more than “one smart bomb falling down the chimney,” he adds, “The truth: I was in the building when we shot that shot.” His contention is not that the Gulf War was faked but that we have no way of knowing what is and is not true. If truth is constructed, he contends, then why not construct it in a way that benefits you? This is the trouble with films like Russell’s and Levinson’s that focus so centrally on the constrained domestic coverage of the conflict. When the media war in the studio receives more attention than the military war in the Persian Gulf, it is easy to see CNN as the real combat zone. Forgotten are the humanitarian wars—rationalized by the kind of stories told by Conrad and Stanley—that were not merely news cycles for the people who lived them.

This Is Vietnam, Jack

While writers, filmmakers, and activists struggled to cut through the sanitized media coverage of the war in the Persian Gulf, Bush’s new world order could not contain the war at home. One year after Bush declared the Vietnam syndrome kicked, the LAPD officers who had beaten King were found not guilty on charges that they had used excessive force in tasing, kicking, and striking King more than forty times. The verdict set off a week of riots that resulted in fifty-four deaths and the destruction of more than eight hundred buildings in South Central Los Angeles and the surrounding area. Mayor Tom Bradley instituted a dusk-to-dawn curfew. And Bush sent in the National Guard and, soon after, the Army and the Marines. His actions drew attention to how the state, then casting itself as leading a new world order founded on universal rights, enlisted military violence as a way to police the boundaries of liberal

humanity inside and outside its borders. From the Middle East to California, war serves as a mechanism of racialization, distinguishing the bodies and social formations to be secured from the bodies and social formations to be converted by force, contained, or targeted for destruction.

The continuities between the Gulf War and the military policing of South Central were not lost on its residents. As Mike Davis observed that spring, the Bush administration used some of the same methods and elite task forces in Los Angeles that it had used in Iraq. But, as one veteran of the 1965 Watts riots told him, “That ole fool Bush think we as dumb as Saddam. Land Marines in Compton and get hisself re-elected. But this ain’t Iraq. This is Vietnam, Jack.”⁴⁰ The man recognized that, while Bush may have controlled the story in the Persian Gulf, he could not achieve the same result in Los Angeles, where the lie of the state as an arbiter of antiracism and human rights could not be maintained. It was out of his control; it was “Vietnam, Jack.” The South Central resident’s words challenged not only Bush’s humanitarian rationale for waging war in the Persian Gulf but also his virtuous rewriting of the war in Southeast Asia by comparing it to the racial policing of black and Latina/o communities in California. While his administration may have, with the assistance of the Human Rights Caucus, rewritten the visual icons of the Vietnam War in the Persian Gulf, it could not contain the image of uniformed officers beating an unarmed black man in Los Angeles. Making a similar connection between humanitarian militarism and domestic law enforcement in her long poem “The Bombing of Baghdad” (1997), June Jordan reverses the liberal-humanitarian terms on which the coalition waged its war, writing, “all who believe only they possess / human being and therefore human rights / they no longer stood among the possibly humane.”⁴¹ She identifies how war reinforces and introduces—rather than mends—breaks in humanity. Whether in the Middle East or South Central, war could not serve a universal good because it could not be conducted without the uneven inclusions, exclusions, and assimilations of liberalism.

After sending tanks to South Central rather than Baghdad, the Bush administration could no longer maintain its story of humanitarian rescue in the Persian Gulf. Americans would instead remember a war for oil broadcast live on CNN. Yet Bush’s narrative had an enduring effect on the post–Cold War military and shaped its involvement in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and elsewhere. With the Soviet Union on the verge of dissolution, his administration substituted the declining rhetoric of anticommunism with liberal humanitarianism and thus found a new way to wage war that could reconstitute the state’s role as a model

for the world. The Gulf War was a transitional event for the United States as the first humanitarian war by which Americans could reimagine the nation's character in relation to the Vietnam War. And, with the Vietnam syndrome kicked, it would not be the last.

Notes

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