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**War Stories TV Tells:
Genre, Gender and Post-9/11 Television**

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Dedication

To Mom and Dad.

Abstract

War Stories TV Tells: Genre, Gender and Post-9/11 Television

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Since 2003, the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars have been present on television in ways that are distinct from previous conflicts, yet media studies have only begun to examine how these contemporary war narratives are becoming more commonplace on entertainment television. This study is an examination of television series that have depicted US conflicts abroad since the 2003 invasion of Iraq in order to survey the popularization of wartime narratives as they are seen across a wide range of programming. Jeanine Basinger and other scholars like Susan Jeffords have posited that war narratives and their reproductions are inherently gendered texts that tend to privilege men in combat while excluding women on the homefront. This exclusion functions to emphasize, celebrate, and restore traditional notions of masculinity tied up in the homosocial nature of war. This study then asks how entertainment television addresses war as a domestic medium that takes part in gendered formulas. Looking at and beyond dramatizations of ground combat so often invoked in limited series like *Off to War* (2005) and *Generation Kill* (2008), this study also highlights the proliferation of war themes in more “feminine” genres like the soap opera. What do female audiences and melodrama posit that more traditional combat genres cannot? And

why do we insist that one informs more than the other? Looking closely at three series -- *Taking Fire*, a reality TV combat series on Discovery Channel; *Army Wives*, a Lifetime primetime soap; and *Homeland*, a “quality” spy drama with a female lead -- this study examines how genre and gender are negotiated on the small screen as they relate to contemporary US conflicts. Shannon argues that television’s assimilation of contemporary war is informed not by the nature of the conflicts themselves, but rather by gendered divisions embedded in TV programming and the generic formulas set forth by traditional combat films.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Theory/ Methodology	10
Chapter One: “A Small Band of Brothers”: Iraq and Afghanistan in Combat Television.....	17
The Myth of Instant Transmission: War and the Moving Image	20
<i>Band of Brothers</i> and Reality TV	25
The Combat Genre on Post-9/11 Television.....	29
<i>Off to War</i> (2004).....	30
Over There (2005) and Generation Kill (2008)	32
The Discovery Channel: Legitimated by Real War.....	34
Conclusion	40
Chapter Two: Lifetime Fits into the Wartime Schedule: Melodrama and All that War Can Allow	44
<i>China Beach</i> (1988), and <i>Major Dad</i> (1989): A Brief History of Soapy Wars..	48
Army Wives: The Military Melodrama	53
Conclusion	64
Chapter Three: So Proudly She Hails: Combat, Melodrama, and <i>Homeland</i>	68
Women in Combat	71
Carrie as Abject Heroine: “It’s my job. It will always be my job! Don’t you get that?!”	76
Conclusion	84

Conclusion: <i>The Looming Tower</i> and Reproductions of 9/11	87
Works Cited	93

Introduction

Our visual apprehension of war is an occasion in which we implicitly consent or dissent to war or where our ambivalent relation is formulated, where we also are able to pose questions about what and how war is presented, and what absence structures and limns this visual field.

Judith Butler, *Frames of War*¹

In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.

Tim O'Brien, "How to Tell a True War Story"²

The trailer for National Geographic Channel's new series, *The Long Road Home* (November 2017), opens with the words "A Bold New Dramatic Series," followed by several takes of American male soldiers walking along a desert road somewhere in what we later find out to be Baghdad. Each has an assault rifle perched into a shooting position and is surveying the landscape in that familiar cinematic mix of intense focus and precarious adrenaline. A string score gets louder and louder as they turn a street corner. The caption, "One of the Darkest Days of the Iraq War," slides across the screen before we see a soldier kick down a door and next an explosion in the road. The trailer cuts to an interview with U.S Army veteran Carl Wild, whose expression is withdrawn: "You make memories on those days like April 4th that you never forget about." Rapid cuts of bullet fire and people shouting lead into a close-up of his somewhat vacant eyes, "no matter how much you want to."

The show is a dramatization of the 2004 events of what is sometimes referred to as "Black Sunday," a lethal ambush by rebel soldiers in Sadr City on a platoon of eighteen US soldiers providing security for the delivery of sewage tanks to the "slum" inside Baghdad. The siege and subsequent rescue mission left eight American soldiers dead along with sixty others wounded.³ The events were first related by ABC reporter Martha Raddatz

in her 2007 book, *The Long Road Home: A Story of War and Family*, from which the show takes its title and subject matter through her time in Baghdad as an embedded journalist.⁴ Raddatz even lends her authorial voice to the mini-series' trailer, proclaiming, "You cannot look at them recreate those characters and not think of the real soldiers and the real families." Later on, we hear from actor Michael Kelly, who plays Lt. Col. Gary Volesky. "I owe it to them to do this the best that I can and because the country should know," he asserts as the words "Global Series Event" cross the screen and the trailer ends. In just over a minute, the promotional video manages to highlight the limited series' commitment to accurately depicting the events at hand, its devotion to the family unit, and an overarching sense of gratitude to the soldiers whose stories are being told. The "real," the "family," and the "war" are the three keywords and overarching themes I find most significant within the trailer in regard to war narrative on television.

I first began my research for this project with the misunderstanding that the American television spectacle of Iraq and Afghanistan was no longer as omnipresent as it had been in the early 2000s. In my view, television in general, despite entering into another "golden age," seemed fairly content to avoid the topic, in both news and entertainment. Particularly during the Obama administration, rarely did I see images of any kind of US conflict abroad. Instead I was enamored with new storylines in shows like AMC's *Mad Men* and HBO's *Girls*, so immersed in the rise and discourse around niche quality television and its introspective character narratives, it seemed to me that this new television culture was at odds with the more traditional war genre. And since Obama's campaign promised that the troops would finally be coming home and Guantanamo would officially shut down, gone were the endlessly repeated images of the Saddam Hussein statue toppling and the prisoner at Abu Ghraib standing with a black bag over his head. This project then

started with the question: Why is war not represented on entertainment television like it is in film or on news outlets?

I expected the more typical answers, like television's long history of commercial sponsorship or federal regulation, factors that would most likely prevent controversial, often violent images from making it to air. I later realized this was not the case; I simply was not the target audience for such content. In actuality, *The Long Road Home* is not the "bold" and "new" dramatic series it claims to be as. In the past year alone, some fifteen years after the first invasion of Iraq, four other new primetime military-based dramas have begun airing alongside the series. *Brave* (2017, NBC), *SEAL Team* (2017, CBS), *Valor* (2017, CW), and another National Geographic production, *Chain of Command* (2018), all portray both fictional and nonfictional accounts of military conflict in the Middle East. "The military may be having a TV moment," observed *New York Times* TV critic James Poniewozik on August 31, 2017, remarking on this rising visibility of war in our primetime slots.⁵

I understand *The Long Road Home* and highlight its promotion here as just one of many American military dramas to choose from in this current moment. The new series is, for several reasons, exemplary of what has now become a rather standard formula for the depiction of our ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It features first and foremost a team of majority white and exclusively male soldiers maneuvering their way through a mission gone unpredictably wrong, often due to misjudgment of higher command or misguided military policies in general. The mission is framed as a failing of both the government, for its inability to protect its soldiers, and in the case of *The Long Road Home*, a failing of Iraqi rebel soldiers, for not complying with the US agenda. The narrative then centers around the depiction and celebration of American male soldiers as they endure the

burden of both of these failings, their success ultimately being their “long road home” back to civilian life.

Emphases on *the real* and *the family* are almost always utilized as reasons to tell and reasons to watch these stories on television, as Raddatz suggests. Claiming “the real” assures a sense of objectivity, where dramatizations of ongoing conflicts are seen in these “television events” as rare access points for audiences and civilians who do not otherwise have permission to see what’s going on overseas. To watch and to think of “the real soldiers and their real families” is also to feel a sense of gratitude for those that have given their service for the country. In many ways, shows like *The Long Road Home* and others I will discuss in this project are sites where viewing becomes, or might be seen as, a patriotic act. In its review for the eight-episode mini-series, *Variety* called *The Long Road Home* “powerfully affecting,” while also positing that it “comes very close to propaganda.” Despite this arguably damning juxtaposition, the trade publication ultimately applauded the show, saying it “excelled in its depictions of logistics and bravery” amongst its male leads.⁶ The tenuous logic of *Variety*’s critique and its following praise is representative of our often contradictory relationship to war media in general, where on the one hand, we are aware of or suspect propagandist qualities, and yet, on the other, are beholden or encouraged to embrace them because of the patriotic duty we feel the text is performing.

Since 9/11, this war formula has ever so slowly and enduringly made inroads into the television industry. Following a similar trajectory to the film industry’s progression of post 9/11 war films, where films released closer to the 2003 invasion of Iraq like *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Lions for Lambs* (2007), and *Stop Loss* (2008) performed rather minimally at the box office (*Lions for Lambs* did the best with \$15 million), and later films like Kathryn Bigelow’s *Hurt Locker* (2008) and Clint Eastwood’s *American Sniper* (2014) earned much higher box office numbers as well as critical acclaim.⁷ Television coverage

has followed a similar pattern, starting off small and rather unnoticed, before presenting bigger and longer wartime narratives in the late 2000s. Discovery Time's 2004 documentary mini-series *Off to War* was television's first attempt at a show that exclusively focused on Iraq. The now defunct cable network – a short-lived partnership between Discovery Channel and *The New York Times* - gave the series little circulation despite positive reviews. Steven Bochco's *Over There* (FX, 2005), the first television drama to depict the war in Iraq, lasted only one season before being canceled.¹ It wasn't until 2008 that HBO released its highly acclaimed seven-part mini-series, *Generation Kill*, earning eleven Primetime Emmy nominations. *The New York Times* called it, "bold, uncompromising, and oddly diffident."⁸

The "war on terror," however, has made more grounded footing on American screens, as other scholars have pointed out, than traditional combat focused series from the very onset of 9/11, as best seen in Fox's *24*, which aired for an unprecedented nine seasons between 2001 and 2010, even reappearing in two reboots, *24: Live Another Day* (2013) and *24: Legacy* (2017). The terrorist/ spy-thriller plotline leaked into many of our cable dramas rather discretely, showing up in later episodes of *JAG* (CBS 1997-2005) and *NCIS: Los Angeles* (CBS 2009) before Showtime's *Homeland* (2011) was even on the scene. Other shows like CBS's *The Unit* (2006) and USA's *Covert Affairs* (2010) also focused on elite military operations within Special Forces and the CIA, occasionally focusing on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

¹ Wartime narratives also cropped up in singular episodes and sub-plots of select series: an hour-long episode of FX's *Louie* in 2011 entitled "Duckling" depicts the comedian in Afghanistan as he tours for the USO and performs for different troops in the region; the character of Dr. Owen Hunt on ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* (2005) suffers from PTSD from his former years working as a surgeon for the US Army in Iraq, etc. In order to limit the scope of my project, I do not explore the probable countless times non-war series have implemented small nods to conflicts abroad.

While there was indeed a moment of silence in the television entertainment industry at first amidst the newsroom dominance after 9/11, dramatic depictions and fictionalized narratives of the multitude of offensive strategies that followed in Iraq and Afghanistan have made significant inroads across our television landscape, moving from subplots and minor characters into fully serialized shows. For better or worse, the US conflicts in the Middle East have certainly seeped into the popular modes of American television.

This project is interested in examining the trends and patterns within television that have worked to produce such formulas present in shows like *The Long Road Home* by looking specifically at the industry practices and genre codes that occupy our post-9/11 televisual landscape. Scholarship has been solely lacking in this area. Most of our attention regarding the war genre has been dedicated to feature films, only rarely looking at television to consider popular representation and discourse around the ongoing US conflicts. It is my intention to focus on to the small screen and survey when and where television has attempted to address a country that has been perpetually at war since 2003. Given the medium's unique qualities of seriality and its attachment to more arduous formulas, what can television posit about our never-ending conflicts that other mediums cannot? How are war narratives shaped through television, especially given the medium's historical attachment to the domestic setting? Thus, I will be looking at explicit depictions of Iraq and Afghanistan and wartime culture and asking what narratives do they tell.

Ultimately, I ask what the television industry and our televisual practices have to say about the relationship American audiences have with US military conflicts. As more popular and formulaic narratives begin to appear on television in lengthier serialized forms, I assess what we can make of television's assimilation in the war genre as these narratives become entrenched with perceptions of the nation state. Since 2003, the Iraq War has been present on television in ways that are distinct from previous conflicts, yet media studies

have only begun to examine ways in which contemporary war narratives are becoming popularized on television.

As mentioned earlier, war is hard to watch. Beyond what can often feel like the excessive violence of a Marvel film, it also feels tenuous as civilians, or the “non-warrior caste,” as Phil Klay recently put it to claim a right to exercise critique.⁹ Audiences, scholars, and critics alike must deal with the tension, which is only worsened with a government that fails to properly justify or even explain military actions, as seen most recently with President Trump’s decision to bomb Syria. War on screen, whether real or dramatized - often a thin line - is difficult to analyze for copious reasons. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag illustrates the precarity of such observations:

It has become a cliché of the cosmopolitan discussion of images of atrocity to assume that they have little effect and that there is something innately cynical about their diffusion. As important as people now believe images of war to be, this does not dispel the suspicion that lingers about the interest in these images, and the intentions of those who produce them.¹⁰

The American audience has experienced various and plentiful forms of media reporting on and depictions of international conflicts, whether on radio, television, film, or the Internet. Alongside this coverage has been a fear or deep skepticism about the power and, as Sontag writes, “intentions” of these mediums and their content. Indeed, the sheer quantity and repetitive, cyclical nature of these images paves the way for both fascination and “innate cynicism” within their very design. From the rise of the Hollywood’s WWII combat film to the network television coverage of Vietnam to CNN’s live 24/7 broadcast of the Gulf War and to drone footage of US bombings in Afghanistan, Americans have witnessed global conflicts through a mediated lens. This lens is often enmeshed with government intervention, industry entertainment practices, and misinformation. As *Variety* rather casually observed, many things often “come close” to “feeling like” propaganda.

Despite television studies becoming more popular and more legitimated over the past forty years, little has been done to address its unique capacity to deliver images of war, despite our insistence of television's increasing cultural significance. Too often questions about violence and hyper-partisanship overwhelm popular and critical discourses so they tend towards outdated media effects arguments. Cultural scholar and poet Maggie Nelson expresses this ambivalent relationship well in her essay, "Theaters of Cruelty": "it may simply be that the time for the efficacy of such an enterprise has passed - not because our complicity has lessened or grown any less toxic, but because the enormity of certain geopolitical crises has made a viewer's complicity in the presumed evils of spectatorship seem like small potatoes. (Yes, we like to watch, but so what?)"¹¹ Television often exists as the place of blame for why we misunderstand the world because of its "info-tainment" culture, yet in the same breadth, our personal viewing practices are easily written off as static buzz in the context of larger global issues. As an avid viewer of *Homeland* myself, I often juggle deep feelings of complicity, ambivalence, and fascination as I find myself pulling for Carrie Mathison in her many chaotic pursuits, often chalking up the implications of my enthusiasm for the show as "small potatoes." How can we begin to talk about our understanding of war in relation to television without diverging into these two opposing sentiments?

Television and film scholars have long worked to debunk simplistic media effects arguments that understand audiences as "passive" or "uninformed." Television scholarship in particular has illustrated the myriad ways viewers can encounter and interpret texts alongside seemingly dominating industry patterns. Amanda Lotz's term, "post-network age," describes TV in the 21st century "as it increasingly exists as an electronic newsstand through which a diverse and segmented society pursues deliberately targeted interests."¹² The post-network era points to a shift toward a fragmented mass audience wherein

television programming and viewing practices are defined increasingly by narrow-casting and what is often called “niche” programming, emphasizing consumer choice and wider ranges of content. Additionally, television, according to John Corner, is in a “post-documentary” age, wherein the traditional documentary form has been disrupted through its appropriation by the explosive growth of reality TV and other semi-fictional programming. Consequently its aesthetics and values now constantly co-opted for more entertainment-driven content.¹³ Network branding and other patterned disruptions of genre are now likely to determine what kind of information we can expect to receive, further complicating our negotiations with television texts and promises of encountering “the real.”

In her comprehensive book, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America*, Stacey Takacs examines what she understands as the “trauma frame,” where the embellishing of American victimhood after 9/11 was “produced by melodramatic news coverage of the attacks, and exacerbated in the popular culture that followed,” thereby “ripping the terrorist attacks from their historical moorings.”¹⁴ Takacs examines a wide range of television programming including a 2004 episode of *Gilmore Girls*, a 2001 *South Park* episode entitled “Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants,” *Arrested Development*, and of course the usual suspects like *24* and other terror/war shows mentioned already. Takacs purports that this broad array of entertainment shows, particularly those on subscription channels not beholden to advertising sponsorships, are capable of doing more cultural and intellectual work than politicians appearing in newsroom bits, explicitly defining television as a “cultural forum,” involving scholars Newcomb and Hirsch to make sense of the ways in which audiences and industries negotiate with one another in terms of content and values.¹⁵ She writes, “while television as a whole has clearly reproduced key aspects of the

political discourse and practice associated with the War on Terror, it has also provided opportunities for viewers to process events in new ways.”

Takacs and television scholar Anna Froula have also done fascinating work together in the recent years on television’s role in the dispersion of war images and narratives in their edited volume, *American Militarism on the Small Screen*. This 2016 collection is comprised of three sections: “World War II on the Small Screen,” “Korea and Vietnam on the Small Screen,” and “Contemporary Conflicts on the Small Screen.” They pose the same question I pose here: “What might television programs about war and militarism, specifically scripted, entertainment programs about these topics, be said to add to the war genre?”¹⁶ I see this project then as contributing to the work Froula and Takacs have already initiated. However, I understand gender as a significant factor within this question of war programming. Given that gendered constructs are embedded in both the war film genre and television frameworks already, how might they inform and effect new war narratives?

THEORY/ METHODOLOGY

In order to address the impact of television culture on war narratives and vice versa, my scope will be limited, like that of Froula and Takacs, to entertainment shows that explicitly portray war content. My analysis also will utilize Jeanine Basinger’s analysis of the Hollywood war film. Basinger writes:

The war film itself does not exist in a coherent generic form. Different wars inspire different genres. ‘War’ is a setting, and it is also an issue. If you fight it, you have a combat film; if you sit home and worry about it, you have a family or domestic film; if you sit in board rooms and plan it, you have a historical biography or a political film of some sort.¹⁷

I am most interested in her delineation here between the combat film and the domestic or “homefront” film; in one “you fight” the war, while in the other, “you sit at home and worry

about it.” Such distinctions are still deeply prevalent in war content today and because of the homosocial nature of war itself, have extremely gendered consequences. Genres can be seen as a “cultural product, constituted by media practices and subject to ongoing change and redefinition,” as described by Jason Mittell.¹⁸ It is often also a marker of gendered narratives, whereby the combat film is dominated by notions of masculinity and the domestic “home-front” genre is defined by its very exclusion from combat, where those that “sit and worry” are immediately feminized. This exclusion functions to emphasize, celebrate, and, in some cases, restore traditional notions of masculinity tied up in the homosociality of war.

Television itself historically has been viewed as a “feminine” medium, not only because of its history of tailoring programming to 1950s housewives but also because of the presumably domesticated and passive engagement by those that watch it. With the expansion and success of subscription channels like HBO and Showtime, television is typically thought of as “better” than it once was, removing at times the accusation of “passivity” from certain programs and installing instead a higher, more active take on viewership, closer to cinema and other high art forms. Michael Newman and Elana Levine in *Legitimizing Television* consider this a naïve notion. They argue that it is “primarily cultural elites who have intensified the legitimation of television by investing the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms and preserving their privileged status in return.”¹⁹ Prestige, cinematic character-driven dramas like *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad* have become a centerpiece to TV’s third golden age and often monopolize discussions of what kinds of television are worthy of study. Critical and scholarly attention often construct and then reaffirm these categories rather than question them. My research will in many ways assert that markers of “quality” are more indicative of higher social norms and class politics than

they are of the significance of the show itself. We will see this many times over in terms of which war media are classified as “quality” and which are not. Critical attention and scholarly attention often construct and then restate and ultimately reify these categories rather than question them.

Questions of quality and gender in the case of the war genre is particularly significant because they, like genre and networks, are intimately tied to questions of information. We see this throughout the history of the war film. In order to be good, it not only must be entertaining but we must feel as though we’ve been informed of something as well. We must feel as though what we have seen is attempting to establish a kind of objective representation of things we do not typically have access to. One obvious example of this is Steven Spielberg’s painstakingly lengthy and gory opening to *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which was promoted as and still considered to be an accurate representation of the events of D-Day on the beaches of Normandy. Not shying away from blood and guts spilling out in the sand and limbs flying out of shell explosions, Spielberg insists the noise and violence are essential to what it must have looked and felt like on that day. This commitment to a kind of standard of war reality made *Saving Private Ryan* one of the most critically acclaimed war films of all time.

In this current televisual climate where the average viewer has more options than ever imagined, where “quality” TV continues to be legitimated as a new art form, and where the rise in reality TV offers up new and inexpensive docu-style entertainment, I aim to examine how contemporary military conflicts make space and negotiate narratives within a medium that is highly regimented by class structures and gender coding. This intervention, which will largely deploy critical discourse analysis of the series in question alongside my own analysis of gendered narratives within the series themselves.

The first chapter is a brief survey of contemporary shows that qualify as some form of the combat genre. Following Basinger, this chapter will show how images of “boots on the ground” now play out on television to illustrate the many ways in which the traditional masculine combat film that deals with “fighting the war” has adapted and evolved over the last decade and where it resides now. If audiences feel as though they are watching men “fighting,” how does this masculine mode effect questions of reception and information? The major shows under examination are FX’s *Over There*, Discovery Times’ *Off to War*, HBO’s *Generation Kill*, and Discovery’s *Taking Fire*, along with other minor examples such as *The Long Road Home*. Questions of quality, legitimacy, critical discourse, and “responsibility” will come into play in this chapter as these shows are most likely to fall under the umbrella of war media with more explicit standards to inform.

The second chapter is a case study of *Army Wives*, a Lifetime primetime soap opera that aired from 2006 to 2012, lasting an impressive seven seasons. It falls under what I consider Basinger’s “domestic” genre, where the soap represents a major shift in popular war media thanks to the seemingly perpetual qualities of the Iraq War. I consider the show in many ways to be antithetical to the shows surveyed in the first chapter, with its duration and emphasis on the homefront being its two most distinctive features. Scholars like Susan Jeffords and Lauren Rabinowitz have pointed out that daytime soaps failed to address topical issues in their time slots during Vietnam and the Gulf War, and thus I see Lifetime’s decision to create a show exclusively about people dealing with the war as representative of a major shift within the history of the soap and in television in general. I also keep feminist scholar Charlotte Brunsdon in mind, who observes that soaps invoke, “culturally constructed skills of femininity – sensitivity, perception, intuition and the necessary privileging of the concerns of personal life” – skills that are built upon and practiced

through the domestic/ soap genre.²⁰ In the case of *Army Wives*, how do these skills engage our perceptions of war media differently than the combat genre?

My third chapter will look at Showtime's *Homeland* as a culmination of the genres and gendered television traditions discussed in the first two chapters. Of all the shows mentioned, *Homeland* has perhaps received the most critical and scholarly attention. An entire issue of *Cinema Journal* was devoted to the discussion of the show in Summer 2015, examining on the ways in which it plays with notions and fears surrounding terrorism. "For some," writes Diane Negra and Jorie Lagerway, "*Homeland* progressively interrogates the role of women in governmental and political regimes; for others, it works to hold in place conservative repressions regarding homeland security profiteering."²¹ On the one hand, discussions around quality and complex female character find critics hailing the show as significant and "legitimate," yet on the other hand, Carrie Mathison's outlandish CIA missions do not posit new interventions on discussions around terrorism. Scholars like Yvonne Tasker and James Castonguay have also examined the ways in which *Homeland*'s formula, along with terrorist-based plotlines on other shows, is heavily influenced by police and crime dramas like *Hill Street Blues* (1981) and *NYPD Blue* (1993). In *Homeland*, where local homicides are replaced by bomb threats and Taliban recruitments taking place at your local tailor replace simple bank robberies, bringing global conflicts into the domestic and familiar setting of the crime drama formula. This chapter will work to contribute to this discussion of *Homeland* as it ties in with other war and military dramas. I will argue its blend of melodrama and international conflict coupled with the placement of a female lead amidst predominately male CIA agents are both qualities representative of the many generic trends and gendered complexities taking place within the war narrative on television today. Having recently been renewed for a seventh and eighth season, making

the show the most successful of in my survey here, *Homeland* has dominated the discussion of war within the entertainment industry.

By examining these programs and the televisual context within which they took shape, I aim to survey and map the routes through which U.S. conflicts come to be depicted on the small screen. By doing so I hope to shed more light on the ways in which war media operate and oscillate in the world of contemporary television and popular entertainment. While it is impossible to reach any kind of holistic conclusions about the political and global implications these shows may contain or the material effects they may have on our national conscious, I aim to further explore the precariousness of war narratives that are enmeshed in western ideals and homosocial values, and that work to affirm, and at best, negotiate perceptions of the nation state. Ultimately, I argue that while television has produced new and relevant war narratives, its assimilation of Iraq, Afghanistan and other contemporary US conflicts is still deeply enmeshed with pre-existing TV formulas and the traditional combat film, both factors defined and restricted by notions of gender.

¹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso Books, 2016), 6.

² Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 78.

³ Ely Bown. "Inside the ambush known Black Sunday." (*ABC News*. November 7, 2017), <https://abcnews.go.com/US/inside-ambush-black-sunday/story?id=50962302>.

⁴ Linda Kulman, "Martha Raddatz Portrays a Platoon Under Fire," NPR.org, n.d., <https://www.npr.org/2008/01/15/17979692/martha-raddatz-portrays-a-platoon-under-fire>.

⁵ James Poniewozik, "War Is Hell? In New Military Dramas, It's One-Dimensional," *The New York Times*, August 31, 2017, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/31/arts/television/valor-seal-team-the-brave.html>.

⁶ Maureen Ryan, "TV Review: 'The Long Road Home' on National Geographic," *Variety* (blog), November 6, 2017, <http://variety.com/2017/tv/reviews/long-road-home-national-geographic-natgeo-1st-cavalry-raddatz-1202607940/>.

⁷ John Hurt, "'The Hurt Locker' Defies the Odds - Latimes," August 6, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/aug/06/entertainment/et-word6>.

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- ⁸ Alessandra Stanley, "In 'Generation Kill' Comrades in Chaos Invade Iraq," *New York Times*, July 11, 2008, sec. Television, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/11/arts/television/11kill.html>.
- ⁹ Phil Klay, "Opinion: The Warrior at the Mall," *New York Times*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/opinion/sunday/the-warrior-at-the-mall.html>.
- ¹⁰ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 111.
- ¹¹ Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 25.
- ¹² Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (NYU Press, 2007), 5.
- ¹³ John Corner, "Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions," *Television & New Media* 3, no. 3 (August 1, 2002), 255–69.
- ¹⁴ Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America* (University Press of Kansas, 2012), 238.
- ¹⁵ Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch. "Television as a Cultural Forum." *Quarterly Review of Film*. Summer 1983.
- ¹⁶ Anna Froula and Stacy Takacs, *American Militarism on the Small Screen* (Routledge, 2016).
- ¹⁷ Jeanine Basinger and Jeremy Arnold, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 1–14.
- ¹⁸ Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (Routledge, 2013), 1.
- ¹⁹ Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (Routledge, 2012), 7.
- ²⁰ Charlotte Brunson, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (Routledge, 2005), 17.
- ²¹ Diane Negra and Jorie Lagerwey, "Analyzing Homeland: Introduction," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 4 (July 22, 2015): 126–31.

Chapter One: “A Small Band of Brothers”: Iraq and Afghanistan in Combat Television

“THE FOLLOWING WAS SHOT BY SOLDIERS ON THE FRONTLINE. THIS IS THEIR STORY.” These words appear across the blurry face of a soldier helping position a small camera on the helmet of his comrade in arms, the frame moving back and forth as the man works to adjust the device. The desert in the background and the familiar sandy beige camouflage worn by the soldier are our only visual cues to let us know we are somewhere in the Middle East. “Gotta make sure your lens is straight, dude,” he says just before the title sequence cuts in.

Taking Fire is a television series which debuted in September of 2016 that consists of five one-hour episodes depicting soldiers based in a heavy fire zone in Afghanistan. The base they occupy and hence “take fire” at sits close to the border of Pakistan and purportedly overlooks a key weapons trade route for the Taliban. The first time I saw the series, I frankly couldn’t decipher if what I was watching was *real* or *not*. The use of footage taken directly from cameras attached to the helmets of soldiers makes *Taking Fire* look and feel quite immediate. Upon further observation, I was surprised to find the material was in fact real video of actual soldiers, constructed almost entirely from personal footage collected by members of the 101st Airborne Division in 2010, collected and edited by the Discovery Channel in 2016.

In an interview with *Variety*, series producers Denise Contis and Joseph Schneier have said it was their intention to “transform the genre of the war documentary,” creating what *Variety* considers a “limited docu-series,” and thereby “allowing viewers to look at this world of intense stakes through a relatable prism.”²² The product is effectively a combat series shot from the first-person perspective. The insistence that this point of view

is a “relatable prism” for viewers to experience combat is a claim rife with implications, the primary assertion being that the positioning of the camera allows us to experience the war as the soldiers do and that this is a *new* vantage point from which to “see” the war, to experience combat with those that face it as a day-to-day reality. With regard to information, entertainment, and the documentary form, particularly for a subject as current and political as the War in Afghanistan, what does the existence of a show like *Taking Fire* - with this use of hyper-reality created by the helmet cameras - suggest?

Considering that the goal of *Taking Fire* is for audiences to “relate” to an American soldier’s vantage point, we can deduce that Discovery Channel believes its audience is interested in or at least curious about the experience of combat. To begin this chapter, it is important to consider exactly what combat as a genre is and how it looks today, or at least how we *perceive* it today. What war even comes to mind when the term “combat” is evoked? I posit that perhaps it is not wholly our contemporary wars but a mixture of prior wars and the reproduction of them on screen. In her exhaustive study of World War II films, Jeanine Basinger writes that, “World War II gave birth to the isolation of a story pattern which came to be known and recognized as the combat genre whether it is ultimately set in World War II, in the Korean War, or in Vietnam, or inside some other genre such as the Western.” She also notes that before World War II, “this combat genre did not exist.” Genre theory has worked to examine ways in which themes and plotlines that fall under a specific genre category become increasingly self-referential the longer they are employed. In the case of WWII according to Basinger, the reproduction of the war becomes its own story or narrative set whose source material relies more so on prior reproductions than the war itself. “Genre theory is a kind of Lego set. It is a bunch of pieces that stay the same, but out of them you can build different things,” writes Basinger. These

moving parts “indicate what audiences of a particular era learned or wanted from these familiar genres.”²³

This chapter traces the combat genre on television in the post-9/11 era in an effort to better understand the formulas that have developed, that we’ve come to expect, and to survey how military and geopolitical conflicts are then reproduced again and again across our television screens. I examine the industrial and critical landscape of the following series: *Off to War* (2003), *Over There* (2004), *Generation Kill* (2008), and lastly *Taking Fire* (2016). In the process, I argue that the combat genre remains ardently intact, as all four series mentioned revolve around what Basinger coins the “journey on” narrative of the ground soldier. Despite the US military’s predominant use of defensive air strategies over the last decade, we are still preoccupied by this traditional “foot soldier.” No matter the environment or circumstance, the threat of death from various sources and the long journey home remain the principal concerns for these men on the ground. We will see that these common narratives often render television content based in Iraq and Afghanistan non-exclusive to its time period and setting.

My notion of the combat genre branches from Basinger’s analysis as I consider new television modes like reality TV and “prestige” programming and their distinct roles in audience reception. Because of its use of hyper-reality and gamer affect, - its visual aesthetic, which I discuss later, resembles that of a first-person shooter video game - I see *Taking Fire* as an extreme example of “war television” that is both part of and divergent from this broader movement of combat television post-9/11. I argue that the further removed we are from 9/11 and the 2003 Iraq Invasion, the greater liberties television has taken to reproduce these events and conceptions of combat following them. In our post-9/11 era, to echo Basinger, it is important to ask what audiences have “learned” and what they have “wanted” from these shows. What exactly we “learn” and “want” from combat

series will prove to be much more multifaceted and tenuous than originally laid out by Basinger, in terms of WWII combat films, when taking television into consideration. It is possible that a series like *Taking Fire* tells us more about television as a technology and cultural form than it does about the War in Afghanistan, as the producer of the show so boldly claims.

THE MYTH OF INSTANT TRANSMISSION: WAR AND THE MOVING IMAGE

“Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death,” writes Susan Sontag in 2003 nonfiction work *Regarding the Pain of Others*. In that 2003 nonfiction book, Sontag surveys multiple instances when images, particularly war images, have shaped and played with public perceptions of global conflicts, remarking on the multitude of ways in which photography as a medium has always been unreliable. She cites photographer Mathew Brady as one of the first to attempt to fully document combat during the American Civil War. Brady is notorious for having moved and adjusted dead bodies of both Union and Confederate soldiers to create dramatic shots, propping up bodies, shifting limbs from here to there, rearranging weapons on the fields of Gettysburg, etc. “What is odd is not that so many of the iconic news photos of the past appear to have been staged,” writes Sontag, “it is that we are surprised to learn they were staged, and always disappointed.”²⁴ Images are indeed products whose construction relies on positionality and reproduction; a camera must take its shot from somewhere, creating a stage in its scope whether intentionally or not. Inevitably photos and images are at once products and processes of historical tampering, vulnerable to infinite interpretations and strategic applications.

In our post-9/11 world, the relationship between warfare and images has only become more tenuous. The most obvious example that comes to mind is the footage of

Saddam Hussein's statue toppling over in Firdos Square on April 9, 2003. Picked up and played on a continuous loop by all the major American news outlets at the time, the fall of the statue was used to represent the success of the US invasion in the removing of a dictatorship and the "freeing" of Iraq. It was later revealed that the entire event was staged by US psychological operations (PSYOP), a category of combat missions that deal directly with manipulating information as it relates to public perception.²⁵ With the help of some marines, the scene intentionally looked like a spontaneous action brought on by the Iraqi civilians and not the US military. In actuality, Baghdad was "violent and chaotic" on April 9th, and nowhere close to achieving any semblance of progress.²⁶

Other images like those of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib and more recently with the series of YouTube videos documenting the beheadings committed by ISIS (most controversial of which was the killing of US journalist James Foley) have also circulated and at times flooded the news landscape surrounding the war. A simple Google search using the search term "ISIS" brings up horrifying headlines like "ISIS beheads four-year-old girl then forces mother to soak hands in dead daughter's blood," illustrating the ways in which the terrorist group utilizes images to shock and disturb through their distribution in Western media outlets.²⁷ Indeed, the attack on the World Trade Centers can be viewed as orchestrated for the same reason - what Takacs calls, "maximum media exposure," making 9/11 "the first salvo" in a "very long information war."²⁸

War images have thus only become more manipulative and weaponized in exceedingly extreme ways during the information age. Jane M. Gaines has recently attempted some reparative thinking regarding the impact of these images in her essay, "The Production of Outrage: The Iraq War and the Radical Documentary Tradition":

One might think that the realization of the new ubiquity of moving image devices would make image suspicion (really "image bashing") obsolete. But we are still in transition, living the paradox. In the technologically uneven and asymmetrical

moment, images are both distrusted *and* declared harbingers of a brave new world of instantaneity and supra-intelligence.²⁹

Here, she outlines the current dichotomy of whereby images at once can simultaneously mean everything and nothing. Her understanding of the moving image as “ubiquitous” is a salient proposition, one that aptly illustrates our technological moment where the majority of cell devices are equipped with cameras, making the act of recording as simple as literally lifting a finger. She fears that this common-ness of the moving image will permanently damage the impact and register of the documentary form, finally urging: “As makers, let us not be out-massed.”

Gaines is not alone in championing the power of images and film to inform and make positive change regarding our contemporary conflicts, despite the mass of those doing otherwise (for instance, Donald Trump’s November 29th retweets of three camera phone videos recording examples of “Muslim violence”).³⁰ In his 2010 book, *Cinema Wars*, Douglas Kellner argues that independent documentaries have invoked pertinent discussions and questions that have intervened on common narratives about the Iraq War, filling in gaps and voids left empty or filled with misleading information by mainstream news outlets. Citing films like *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), *Body of War* (2007), *Redacted* (2007), and *No End in Sight* (2007) Kellner argues, “Hollywood films sharply critiqued salient aspects of the Bush-Cheney administration in entertainment and documentary cinema. They presented different and more critical visions of 9/11 and the so-called war on terror than either the Republican administration or the mainstream corporate media.”³¹ In some ways, it has become the objective of cinema to shed light on military conflicts where other media outlets have either remained silent or insist on the mischaracterization of US involvement. Errol Morris’s documentary *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), for instance, takes a closer look at Abu Ghraib, disputing the common

narrative that a few select “bad” US soldiers were to blame for the mistreatment and abuse of Iraqi prisoners, rather than the poorly managed prison system and intentionally vague military policies on torture in place around the time the photos were taken. The film asserts that the mistreatment depicted in the photo leak in fact fell under “standard operating procedure,” and were ultimately sanctioned by the US government on several counts, thus illustrating the ways images can be used as evidence for one thing while covering up something else at the same time. What Kellner and Morris highlight is the necessity for documentary and other films to pick up where news outlets have left off.

As television has become championed and deemed more “cinematic” in the last decade, how does it intervene within these narratives? Hyper-partisanship and the “ubiquity” of image making have made our traditional news outlets less and less credible so that we must often look elsewhere, as Gaines and Kellner have demonstrated, for more nuanced and explorative discussions of the war abroad. Television, because of its history as a medium fundamentally wed to commercial interests, particularly in the US, has always been relatively distrusted regarding its ability to produce objective and educational programs and thus achieve such discussions. Indeed, in a series of essays revolving around watching Vietnam on television throughout the late sixties, critic Michael Arlen writes, “I don’t know what gets into a television-network news department that makes it think it has to stand so foursquare behind the governments of the United States in all its comings and goings.” Remarking on NBC’s half-hour *Vietnam Weekly Review* program, which did very little to criticize or complicate the government’s own narrative of the war, Arlen amusingly bemoans, “Come off it, NBC!”³²

Indeed, television’s capacity to intervene, particularly when it comes to war reporting, has rarely been celebrated, let alone trusted. Yet shortly after Arlen’s rather devastating critique of the “Living Room War,” Raymond Williams wrote his foundational

text on television that posits a much more positive take on the medium. First published in 1974 as cable television was about to explode, Williams spends a significant amount of time in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* airing his many grievances with academia's celebration and acceptance of Marshall McLuhan's famous book *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. "The physical fact of instant transmission as a technical possibility, has been uncritically raised to a social fact, without any pause to notice that virtually all such transmission is at once selected and controlled by existing social authorities," he writes. His fear is one in which McLuhan's message, which Williams understands primarily as an aesthetic theory, becomes co-opted as a social theory. If the medium is the "massage," then television is the hypodermic needle of information, corrupting our brains with its flow of images, where no barrier exists between the screen and our consciousness. While this is not exactly McLuhan's intended message (aptly so), Williams' response is a salient one, filled with apprehension and a general unwillingness to condemn a technology he finds so filled with potential. "Instant transmission," according to Williams, is a falsehood developed out of paranoia, an oversimplification of technology alienated from its social construction and social function. Williams posits instead that "technology, including communication technology, and specifically television, is at once an intention and an effect of a particular social order."³³

It is this notion - that television brings forth both an intention as well as an array of its own "effectedness" - that I will use as a cornerstone for understanding *Taking Fire* and the post- 9/11 combat shows that precede it. Hirsch and Newcomb expand on Williams' in their essay, "Television as a Cultural Forum," by assessing television's relationship to an existing social order as something more like a "cultural litmus test," where factors like the myriad relationships between producers and audiences that function as major contributors to said "social order." According to Hirsch and Newcomb, both producers and audiences

can be seen as interpreters of “behavior,” by defining the “permissible” and the “normal” regarding what is appropriate for television.³⁴ While they make little mention of the effect of industry practices as more recent scholarship has pointed out and as Williams does somewhat with his analysis of the BBC, their understanding of television as a process that requires permission from audiences and producers is one worth keeping in mind, particularly as it connects to conversations around genre and form.

In the following section, I argue that permission may come less from moral values and notions of appropriateness than from what we’re accustomed to already as viewers and as habitual consumers of images. As reality television has changed our understanding of what’s meant to be “real” and as prestige television has dictated what’s meant to be “good,” how does this particular televisual social order effect what we inevitably grant permission to, especially if we understand these images as part of an extensive history in war-making and social consciousness that at times fall into the self-referential mode of genre? The following is a brief history of the rise of reality TV as it relates to the rise of the combat genre on television, as seen through HBO’s programming decisions in the early 2000s.

BAND OF BROTHERS AND REALITY TV

“One of the strengths of television is that it can enter areas of immediate and contemporary public and, in some sense, private action more fully and more powerfully than any other technology.” When Raymond Williams was asserting this position back in 1974, largely in response to the increase in what he was calling “drama documentaries” on television at the time, PBS had recently finished airing its serial documentary series, *An American Family*. Williams called it a “fascinating” and “dramatic experience,” and took a moment to quell criticisms about the show’s editing style and purportedly “neutral” positioning within the family dynamic: “An editing technique can be used in either interest,

and just as there should be social controls when accurate reporting is in question, so there should be social opportunities when it comes to creative interpretations.” The startlingly honest display of the upper-middle class Loud family reportedly inspired MTV’s *The Real World* two decades later, and thus an entire teen-branded network of reality television and the endless spin-offs that followed (and still follow). While Williams couldn’t have imagined that drama documentaries would eventually lead to reality television - nor can I comment on the educational and public value he would ascertain it to have - he certainly predicted the creative explosion in which information could be projected within the form itself in addition to preemptively cultivating it as a high culture medium.

Twenty-five years later, in the wake of MTV’s reality-TV-fueled teen culture invasion and in the midst of new ultra-popular reality competition shows like *Survivor* (2000), *Big Brother* (2001), and *Fear Factor* (2001), HBO began to assert its own stake within the mixed documentary form. In “I Think We Need a New Name for It,” Susan Murray unpacks the ways in which HBO was able to excel at producing “quality” documentary in the early 2000s as networks were facing looming writer’s strikes and, additionally, the 2000 commercial actor strike that lasted six months.³⁵ The lack of actual scripts and sponsorships prompted major networks like Fox and NBC to devote more programming to reality TV rather than traditional scripted drama and sitcom series because of the reduced costs in writing and production values reality TV allows. The impact of reality programming on the major networks marks a significant shift within the history of the documentary form, not to mention primetime TV programming and scheduling. Overall, reality TV led to a popular embracing and revamping of a new visual and informational aesthetic, one in which television, across its entire spectrum, had to assimilate in some way.

Murray specifically examines PBS's attempt at a reality/ documentary hybrid series in the wake of their own budget cuts with the unsuccessful *American High* (2001), understanding its failings as the beginning of HBO's documentary takeover that follows in the early 2000s. PBS picked up *American High* as a documentary series from Fox, where it had been airing as a reality program. The series, which ran for thirteen half-hour episodes, looked at the lives of fourteen high schoolers living in Highland Park, Illinois. "The idea was to attract teens to PBS by making the series appear entertaining, while simultaneously appeasing its core audience by wrapping it in the discourse of education," writes Murray. The show attempted to both focus on teen romances and drama in a similar vein as *The Real World* while also marketing it as an education source for parents and teachers to learn more about teenagers in the contemporary moment. "The strategy failed on both fronts," she contends, arguing that "it became increasingly difficult for [PBS] not only to fund documentaries but also to air work that was explicit or controversial." Later in 2001, following *American High*'s failure to capture controversial enough material for younger audiences and appease older viewers looking for more traditional programming, HBO began airing new episodes of its nonfiction anthology series *America Undercover* on a weekly basis in place of its previous monthly schedule.³⁶ The series at this point was already known for its controversial content, having explored topics like prostitution, pedophilia, and drug use in previous episodes. TimeWarner's press release announcing the new schedule and increased production includes a statement from HBO's executive VP, Shiela Nevins, calling *America Undercover* a "great opportunity, because it provides a visible, regular time slot for reality programming that preserves the documentary form focusing on real people, real places and real feelings."

HBO's emphasis on "preserving" the documentary and thus dealing with "real" people as opposed to the unreal people on other reality television is one of the myriad

strategies HBO uses to market itself as high quality and high culture, defining itself as “not TV,” *the opposite of* and *the answer to* commercial networks and their limitations.

To court a particular type of audience identification and set of expectations, television networks can take a program that has somewhat liminal textual generic identifiers and sell it as either a documentary or a reality program by packaging it in such a way to appear either more educational/ informative or more entertaining/ sensational, or, in some cases, both. In this way, the networks are working with the audience’s prior experience and expectations of each form and then highlighting certain aspects of the text to ensure that it is read in a particular way.³⁷

Here Murray further outlines the ways in which HBO’s strategic packaging of *America Undercover* worked to distinguish itself from commercial network programming, striking a balance between entertainment and education that pleased audiences seeking more controversial content. *America Undercover*’s place on HBO demonstrates the malleability of television’s “generic identifiers” to fit within audience perceptions of the documentary form while also working to construct and bolster an active social brand for the network.

In 2001, the same year that it began to expand its documentary content, HBO also released the most expensive television series produced to date with *Band of Brothers*. With names like Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks behind it and a world premiere event on Utah Beach in Normandy, France, HBO was undoubtedly looking to take on a heavier weight class within the cinematic world in addition to their documentary content.³⁸ Thomas Schatz notes that, “a limited series like *Band of Brothers* can scarcely be expected to attract new subscribers, so cultural cachet may well have been a prime motivation for HBO’s massive investment.”³⁹ Housing such a prestigious project, while going against the grain of its smaller budget serial dramas, HBO employed big names, big budget, and big spectacle promotion to elevate the network’s perceived social value and significance. It could now

be seen as a network large enough and capable enough to reproduce and even invigorate something as historically significant as the American WWII narrative.

I see the production of *America Undercover* and *Band of Brothers* coinciding in the same moment as illustrative of a significant industrial practice. The pair exemplify the ways in which perceptions of both the documentary and the combat genre, particularly the WWII combat genre, often work not just to entertain and inform, but to bolster and legitimize the networks that produce them. HBO took advantage in the early 2000s of the commercial network struggle to provide thoughtful entertainment - beyond what many see as “trashy” reality content – to redefine what it is that television is capable of. The documentary content does just this because of its connotation of high culture and higher education, as Murray and Nevins have argued. *Band of Brothers* exemplifies this delicate balance between documentary and entertainment, where the grand struggle of a war narrative entails deep moral perplexity ultimately resolved by masculine heroism - Basinger’s “journey on” sentiment - a formula that almost always demands that a level of seriousness be paid to it, both in a popular *and* a critical sense. What is perhaps so brilliant about selling a war narrative, then, is that it is at once perceived as informative *and* sensational, giving it a potentially massive range of appeal, regardless of whether or not it is perceived as one or the other. It is this implicit dichotomy that the combat shows airing after 9/11 so often contained or worked to embody.

THE COMBAT GENRE ON POST-9/11 TELEVISION

As Thomas Schatz points out, *Band of Brothers* happened to debut on HBO just *two days* before September 11th. “Given not only the collective psyche of the American public but also the massive media resources used to depict (and formulate) the War on Terror,” writes Schatz, “HBO’s ambitious portrayal of the Second World War and the

Greatest Generation now seemed oddly anachronistic.” Indeed, the grandeur and glory of the “last good war” depicted on *Band of Brothers* airing simultaneously with 24/7 breaking news coverage of the Trade Center towers collapsing into ash only highlighted the show’s oddly placed nostalgia as it continued to reproduce foreign conflicts that were wholly isolated and detached from the current geopolitical crisis.

Among the critical and occasional commercial success of some Iraq War films - *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *American Sniper* (2014) - networks since 2003 have slowly begun to take on projects that depict combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. The following section will survey a few key programs that illustrate television’s intentions, social orders, and industrial practices surrounding its depictions of Iraq and Afghanistan leading up to *Taking Fire*.

***Off to War* (2004)**

Often considered one of the first television shows to seriously address the Iraq War, *Off to War* is a ten-part documentary series that aired while the invasion of Iraq was still ongoing. It focused on members of the Arkansas National Reserve as they prepare and eventually head to Iraq, depicting events both from overseas and from back home as families of the soldiers react to their new absence and await to hear news. More “restrained, probing, and reflective,” than other typical reality TV formats that the show mimics, writes Douglas Kellner, *Off to War* demonstrated television’s new abilities to take on topics and the nuance attached to them that only film had previously displayed. Its directors, Craig and Brent Renaud, were able to capture footage from families in Arkansas as well as footage from Iraq, having deployed with their subjects as embedded reporters, depicting emotional moments like the death and funeral of one of the soldiers and an unexpected pregnancy announcement. Its perspective highlighted the effect the massive deployments

were having on rural areas in particular within the US, detailing ways in which families were forced to struggle financially with the loss of some key breadwinners and exploring the naivety and lack of preparedness amongst the young men deployed.

Yet “for all of its cultural centrality,” writes Amanda Lotz in *The Television Will be Revolutionized*, “*Off to War* existed in comparative obscurity on what might be described as an ultra-niche cable network,” contending that while it provided a once “inconceivable range of content” rarely seen on television, the series unfortunately aired to a rather minuscule audience due to Discovery Time’s limited viewership on premium cable. While *Off to War* was one of the first instances of TV coverage of the war in Iraq outside the realm of news programming, it existed on the short-lived Discovery Times Channel, a four-year partnership between Discovery Communications and The New York Times Co. that aimed to create investigative and documentary content. The partnership ended in 2006 when *The New York Times* pulled out to focus on video content within its own online platform rather than television.⁴⁰ The show perhaps feels unique because of this temporary partnership, a commercial network coupling with a leading newspaper to create the very first documentary series about Iraq.

It is not surprising that the first show to be released about the war resembles an interesting mixture of documentary film and reality television. Watching the trailer alone reveals the influence of shows like *The Real World*, where the use of a handheld camera and heavy stylized editing (in the use of slow motion and choice of music), and the frequent use of emotional sound bites coupled with confessional interviews by individual family members and the soldiers. The subtitle itself, *Off to War: From Rural Arkansas to Iraq*, mimics the narrative structure of the *The Real World*, wherein cast members prepare themselves emotionally for their journey from small-town America to a major American city. This narrative also embodies Basinger’s “journey on” sentiment of the American foot

soldier as it understands these men to be ostensibly plucked from their hometown communities and dropped into a deadly war zone.

While the series does illustrate real consequences of the war, making plain the lack of preparedness of the National Reserve and the minimal funding given to its Arkansas members, *Off to War* functions largely in an apolitical mode. It presents Iraq from the viewpoint of small-town men being thrust into alien environment, taking on the voice of rural naivety rather than asserting its own. Although situated in Iraq, one could argue we see as little of that country as we do the cities in *The Real World*, where activity is kept almost entirely indoors with most of the show depicting male soldiers in their bunks lamenting their fears, showing their excitement, or, more typically, just goofing off.

The next major television documentary series depicting American combat in the Middle East was *Taking Fire* in 2016, fully twelve years later on a revamped Discovery Channel. What we have in between are two drama series depicting yet another take on the initial 2003 invasion.

***Over There* (2005) and *Generation Kill* (2008)**

The first cable drama to address Iraq was Steve Bochco's *Over There*, which aired on FX in 2005. The show depicts the US Army's Third Infantry Division as they complete their first tour of duty in Iraq. Lasting only one season with a total of 13 episodes, despite involvement from the *Hill Street Blues*, *LA Law*, and *NYPD Blue* showrunner, the series went down quickly with criticisms of excessive violence. It was the first of two shows to use the account of *Rolling Stone* reporter, Evan Wright - later published as a book entitled *Generation Kill* (2004) - which documented the initial 2003 invasion through the experience of an intimate and diverse group of men who gradually become disenchanted with their mission and their plight in the foreign country.

Bohco's ambitious production didn't pay off and the failure of such content left a sizeable silence within the entertainment television industry for some time with respect to the conflicts abroad. It wasn't until 2008 that HBO released a seven-part docudrama miniseries about the war, this time directly adapting Wright in a show entitled *Generation Kill*. The series depicts the invasion with exact details and names of Wright's actual United States Marine Corps troop (the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion), even getting some of the marines to play themselves. Produced by *The Wire*'s David Simon, the show features a mission-per-episode formula similar to *Band of Brothers* but updated with the kind of crude pessimism and prideful ignorance towards the Middle East amongst its soldiers seen earlier in films like *Jarhead* (2005). Nominated for eleven Primetime Emmys, *Generation Kill* was critical of the U.S. deployment, showing the marines' frustration to learn they're not there to find weapons of mass destruction as they instead must avoid enemy fire from insurgents coming in from Syria. They want to provide humanitarian relief for civilians but are ordered repeatedly to move on to the next town, creating a kind of surrealist blend of American ambivalence and bureaucratic absurdity as the men sing out their frustration through pop music while riding around in Humvees.

What's notable about the two shows is that many of the qualities that *Over There* was criticized for were the same qualities *Generation Kill* was applauded for three years later. It was blatantly anti-war, anti-Bush-Cheney, violent, and crude. The difference in reception can arguably be summed up to timing and network. *Over There*'s somewhat critical depiction of the war in Iraq debuted too soon after the 2003 invasion in order to sit positively with the FX audience in 2005. For HBO three years later, the ability to show violence, swear excessively, and take on a more liberal viewpoint were all factors promised and celebrated within the network's brand.

As mentioned before, it is worth noting that *Off to War*, *Over There*, and *Generation Kill* all focused on the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In varying levels of critique, the three exist across a four-year time period throughout Bush's second term. While it's not surprising that the shows become more critical the further away from the invasion they air, it is alarming to see such a refusal to shift the focus away from the same event. While US intervention has largely been deployed in the air and through drone strikes over the last decade, these shows indicate that we prefer to see what's happening on the ground to the soldiers on foot. By continually going back to the one of the largest ground invasions in modern US history, these shows posit an obsessive desire to focus on a specific and well-known ground offensive instead of looking at the other events and other types of combat that have taken place in the Middle East. The shows then further establish Basinger's understanding of the combat genre in their slight adjustments of identical parts, moving around (1) a troop of men, (2) the 2003 Invasion, and (3) a lack of preparations, in order to construct varying messages regarding the US instigation of and its ongoing incursion into Iraq.

THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL: LEGITIMATED BY REAL WAR

When *Taking Fire* arrived in 2016, the focus was no longer the invasion, but a group of men on base in Afghanistan, still insisting our empathy for the foot soldier and an undying interest in ground combat. As mentioned earlier, *Taking Fire* is a compilation of personal footage shot by soldiers in the 101st Airborne Division, "showcasing everything from American soldiers under fire to playing pranks on each other." Discovery insisted their series gives a "real, raw insight" of a current war zone that "most people have never experienced before." To return to Susan Murray: "The distinctions we make between forms of nonfiction television are not based on empirical evidence but are largely contained in

the evaluative connotations that insist on separating information entertainment, liberalism from sensationalism, and public service from commercialism.” As generic identifiers from traditional documentary pave their way over to TV and then back again, it’s no longer enough to depend on formal visual codes to decipher between information and entertainment. Murray insists that our interpretation of genre, in the case of reality or nonfiction or drama, now depends on the “industrial management of extratextual discourses.”⁴¹ Network branding alongside the strategic use of generic identifiers are more likely to convey what strict genre categories like the documentary once did. In other words, networks themselves are more likely to act as signposting with regard to what kind of information we should expect to receive than the content in question. This is especially true when examining *Taking Fire* in the context of The Discovery Channel.

I initially thought the helmet camera footage in *Taking Fire* was staged. I thought this for a multitude of reasons, including an excessive list of editing embellishments, but mostly because it would not have been the first time the Discovery Channel fooled its audience with fake “personal” footage. In 2012, they aired what they later called a “docu-fiction” entitled *Mermaids: The Body Found*, a film which began with what looked like video taken from the camera phone of an innocent beach stroller coming across the body of a scaly, fish-like corpse in the sand. When the pedestrian got closer to the mysterious fleshy lump, the camera dramatically cut out just after capturing black eyes and gills opening in anger. The premise of the film ultimately insisted on obscure evolutionary theory and a government cover-up to illustrate the existence of mermaids. While it did feature a small disclaimer during the opening credits, many viewers expressed their confusion over the show’s content and finely crafted appeals to conspiracy theory enthusiasts. It prompted an official statement from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and a “de-bunking” column from *Wired* magazine.⁴² For a period of time, docu-fictions like these

were some of the more popular staples of The Discovery Channel and on its other properties such as Animal Planet.

In 2016, to the dismay of some fans, Discovery Channel dropped *Mermaids* from its Shark Week programming after three years of releasing new annual sequels. According to *Business Insider*, “its new president Rich Ross announced the removal of such dramatized programming, saying it wasn't ‘right’ for the network. Instead, the channel was planning on leaning toward more real research.”⁴³ That same year, the network released *Taking Fire* as parts of its new crossover programming (or cross-back?) into “real research.” The very real documentary about the war in Afghanistan exists next to other Discovery programming like *Alaskan Bush People*, *Deadliest Catch*, *Naked and Afraid*, *Mythbusters*, *Bering Sea Gold*, *Fast N’ Loud*, and *Street Outlaws*. On the surface, it may not seem as though these titles have anything to do with each other, but Discovery Channel’s website recommended them to me as a viewer of *Taking Fire*. The network’s expertise now seems to lie in the hyper-masculine and the hyper-real portrayals of men doing manly things, like surviving in the wilderness, catching Alaskan crab, fixing cars, solving science riddles, and going to war. It’s important to note that the hero in all of these scenarios is the white working-class male, Discovery’s target audience.

I see this move as mirroring similar tactics employed by HBO with the production of *Band of Brothers*. By using conventions of both the war documentary and the combat genre, Discovery Channel separates itself from less “legitimate” reality television. I understand “legitimate” here as understood by Newman and Levine, where “legitimation works in part by aligning television with that which has already been legitimated,” and by “distancing more respectable genres of TV associated with less valued audiences who have previously been seen as central to television’s cultural identity –women, children, the elderly, those of lower class status, people who spend their days at home.”⁴⁴ Indeed, the

pilot of *Taking Fire* is called, “Band of Brothers,” where the men featured even refer to themselves as a “small band of brothers” repeatedly throughout the series, invoking the HBO series and the obvious themes of brotherhood and masculinity tied to it. Kyle Boucher, JJ McCool, Ken Shriver, Chris Adams and Kyle Petry make up the key players within the band, their talking heads appearing in interviews alongside the footage to explain specific moments in combat and rehash their time spent on base.

Yet, the show’s footage drastically diverges from the high production values of *Band of Brothers* and *Generation Kill*. Thanks to the helmet cameras, the composition of *Taking Fire* shares more similarities with a first-person shooter video game than more typical war documentaries. Scenes often feature an assault rifle, perched in the center of the screen, surveying the landscape from side-to-side, while the boundaries of the frame move in rhythm according to the pace of the soldier, thereby alerting us to the kind of motion they are in, whether it be walking, running, or sometimes ducking. Non-diegetic elements infiltrate the screen for an even more direct callout to gamer culture - names of other soldiers floating over their heads as they too survey the landscape, names of weapons, artillery, and vehicles in use appearing in lists on the side of the screen - as if you were a player picking your preferred team and your preferred “arsenal.”

“It all started when producer Laura Dunne caught sight of a brief clip of action in Afghanistan on Funker530.com,” writes a promotional blogpost on Discovery’s website. “From there, she was able to get in touch with Kyle ‘Bobby’ Boucher, one of the soldiers featured throughout the series, who directed her to other members of his unit who recorded action firsthand on the front lines in Afghanistan.”⁴⁵ When asked in an interview whether it was common for people to be filming while on base, Kyle Boucher said it was “pretty new at the time. I don’t even think that they had GoPros out yet. I thought it was cool that

a couple guys were getting [cameras] because I figured if we get some good stuff on there we'll all be able to share it with each other and have it for the rest of our lives."⁴⁶

The online forum where some of the footage was first found, Funker530, has frequently met with controversy due to the violent content it often houses on its platform. In essence, the forum encourages service members to upload personal combat footage to share and circulate amongst other veterans. Calling itself "The Largest Veteran Community," it first began as a YouTube channel, where some of its videos now boast over 37 million hits. It eventually grew large enough to form its own site, foregoing YouTube's community guidelines regarding graphic content. In order to respond to a controversy around a video featuring a marine getting shot in the neck, reportedly without the knowledge of that particular marine, the founder of Funker530 went on Reddit to address the site's mission and justify the video, writing that "the overall theme of FUNKER530 has always been to appeal mostly to the grunts, but we realize that a large portion of the community is family members and kids curious about the military. We try to keep our content as 'safe' as possible, while still keeping it raw."⁴⁷

This sort of uncensored "violence for violence's sake" showcased on Funker530 is present in *Taking Fire*. In the first episode, a Humvee drives over an IED, immediately killing its driver and another soldier inside. We see blood but the bodies themselves are blurred. In the next episode, the platoon's medic takes a bullet in his neck and the back-up medic must struggle to stop the bleeding as more bullets continue to fly overhead. Later on, a soldier is shot in the shoulder and we see from the camera of his peer trying to stop the blood with his hands. The show thus does not shy away from the gore involved in these violent encounters. The first-person effect intensifies and arguably revels in the chaos and confusion happening on the ground, taking the audience and forcing us to feel as jostled and unsettled as the helmet cameras are.

Beyond the “raw” violence, over the course of five episodes, we see the small group of men attempt to provide protection for local Afghanistan civilians while they build a girls’s school (Episode 3, “Flipping the Switch”) and hold a local election (Episode 4, “Overwatch”) by providing cover above in the mountain ranges and searching for IEDs in the roads. The series then features clips of interviews filmed in 2016 of the men rehashing their time there and what it feels like to be home away from their “brothers.” The primary focus is the experience of the five men, their reactions to their footage, their memories of taking it, and the rare moments of emotion the producers are able to extract from them within their retelling. The final episode sees all five meeting up at a bar five years after their time in Afghanistan with their wives and children in tow; in something of an afterthought, *Taking Fire* also attempts to highlight issues like PTSD and depression in its final episode. However, the rest of the series works to in revel in the chaos of the helmet cameras, enclosing the majority of the narrative to moments of high-stakes action while building this sense of brotherhood.

There is a vague understanding of the Taliban, but for the most part enemy combatants appear as invisible sources of gunfire within the mountains. Never once on the show do we them in the flesh. When we do see others, it is often Afghani children, whose faces are blurred, tailing beside the troop’s vehicles, often invoking only brief moments of sentimentality. In the final episode, because the troop has experience increased retaliation and two deaths, they are ordered to evacuate the base and go home. As they drive through neighboring towns in their exit route, local Afghani civilians begin to gather on the road to inquire about the fleet of military vehicles moving through their street. Their presence causes major concern and anxiety for some the troop members, who have clearly become extremely distrustful of civilians throughout their time on base, weary of another Taliban attack. One soldier even violently yells at a group of women to “stay the fuck back!”

Unfortunately, because *Taking Fire*'s main concern is with the American soldiers and their physical movement on and off the base - its source material entirely dictated by just that - it avoids even acknowledging the experience of civilians the soldiers do encounter. We don't get a sense of what the Afghans want in this scene or whether they are a real source of danger for the troop. Their faces are blurred, making their presence in their own town feel alien even to the viewer.

CONCLUSION

It may be simple enough to disregard *Taking Fire* as a blip in the deluge of Discovery Channel's current hyper-masculine documentary and reality TV content. But in terms of this project, the series serves as an entry point for thinking about that status of the combat genre on television throughout the Iraq and Afghanistan War. I understand it as contributing to a trend of combat shows that have aired post-9/11 depicting the conflicts in the Middle East *and* as representative of the progressing conflation of the documentary form and reality TV. I see this as an important intervention in an ongoing discussion of war images and media effects. As Gaines puts it, "images are both distrusted *and* declared harbingers of a brave new world of instantaneity and supra-intelligence." The Discovery Channel in many ways embodies this dichotomy with the move from *Mermaids* to *Taking Fire*. The helmet footage works to legitimize the channel's content and distance itself from all that is fake, where the only "real" thing are the men on the battlefield.

While on the surface *Taking Fire* looks as though we've entered into a new realm of television, and perhaps we have, its roots are easily defined. It is a combat show whose position within Discovery Channel's programming should be read as an attempt to better legitimize its content by appealing to a more masculine and thus more "quality" audience. We don't really learn what it's like to take fire in Afghanistan nor do we ever learn why

some people currently are. What we do learn is that we're comfortable with a corporation using the war in Afghanistan and the depicted deaths of real people as a branding tool.

Iraq and Afghanistan now exist on our small screens now as a subgenre within the category of combat. From what can be gathered by these new shows, the warzones are somewhere vaguely in the Middle East. The "real" being portrayed is the combat, in all its confusion and disarray, alienated entirely from the intricacies of our actual conflicts. From these shows we can see that popular realities have begun to form, in which repeated narratives about Iraq and Afghanistan take on something of a life of their own, separated from their real subjects, yet existing nonetheless, whether believable or not. What the series discussed throughout this chapter largely explain is a persistent desire to further understand our contemporary conflicts as missions that (mostly white) American men still suffer, endure, and survive on the ground. End stop. *Taking Fire* highlights and elevates this desire through its use of the first-person. Together, their unified silence against other voices and other experiences, including those of women and people of color back home and in the military, as well as the experience of Iraqi and Afghani civilians, is resounding and unfortunately unsurprising. Focusing on these "small bands of brothers" feeds into legitimating constructs while simultaneously narrowing the scope of discussion, promising to inform and provide new perspectives, these series consistently turn the narrative away from questions or discussions about the source of those conflicts.

²² "Helmet-Cams Give Discovery War-Doc Series 'Taking Fire' Hyper-Real Look," *Variety*, n.d., <http://variety.com/2016/artisans/production/discovery-war-documentary-taking-fire-1201878302/>.

²³ Basinger and Arnold. *The World War II Combat Film*, 16–17.

²⁴ Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 24, 55.

²⁵ "Reminder: Saddam Statue Was Toppled by Psy-Ops," *NPR*, n.d., <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89489923>.

²⁶ Max Fisher. "The Truth About Iconic 2003 Saddam Statue-Toppling," *Atlantic*, January 3, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/01/the-truth-about-iconic-2003-saddam-statue-toppling/342802/>.

²⁷ "ISIS Beheads Four-Year-Old Girl Then Forces Mother to Soak Hands in Dead Daughter's Blood," *Express*, n.d., <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/681371/Isis-behead-toddler-Syria-mother-blood>.

²⁸ Takacs, *Terrorism TV*, 1–29.

²⁹ Jane Gaines. "The Production of Outrage: The Iraq War and the Radical Documentary Tradition," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 48, no. 2 (September 17, 2007), 36–55.

³⁰ Peter Baker and Eileen Sullivan. "Trump Shares Inflammatory Anti-Muslim Videos, and Britain's Leader Condemns Them," *New York Times*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/29/us/politics/trump-anti-muslim-videos-jayda-fransen.html>.

³¹ Douglas Kellner. *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 200–233.

³² Michael J. Arlen, *Living-Room War* (Syracuse University Press, 1997), 14.

³³ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Psychology Press, 2003), 129–31.

³⁴ Newcomb, Horace and Hirsch, Paul. "Television as a Cultural Forum." (*Quarterly Review of Film*, Summer 1983).

³⁵ Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette. eds., *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, 2nd ed (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 65–81.

³⁶ "New 'American Undercover' Weekly Documentary Series Scheduled for 11 Consecutive Sundays on HBO beginning March 11." (TimeWarner Press Release, January 19, 2001).

³⁷ Murray and Ouellette. *Reality TV*, 65–81.

³⁸ "HBO to hold World Premiere of Band of Brothers June 6th at Utah Beach in Normandy, France." (TimeWarner Press Release, March 28, 2001).

³⁹ Thomas Schatz. "Band of Brothers." *The Essential HBO Reader*. Ed. Edgerton & Jones. (University Press of Kentucky, 2008.), 125-134.

⁴⁰ Ann Becker. "Schiller Exits Discovery for New York Times.com." (Broadcasting and Cable, April 2006).

⁴¹ Murray and Ouellette. *Reality TV*, 61–85.

⁴² David Mikkelson. "Mermaids: The Body Found: An Animal Planet program that supposedly revealed the existence of mermaids was a fake documentary." (*Snopes*, May 29, 2012), <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/mermaids-the-body-found/>.

⁴³ Kathleen Wong. "Shark Week dropped its controversial Megalodon mockumentary – and fans are not happy." (*Business Insider*, July 27, 2016),

http://www.businessinsider.com/shark-week-dropped-its-controversial-megalodon-mockumentary-and-fans-are-not-happy-2016-6?pundits_only=0&get_all_comments=1&no_reply_filter=1.

⁴⁴ Newman and Levine. *Legitimizing Television*, 5.

⁴⁵ Cshirley. "Experience the Front Lines of War Like Never Before in Discovery's All New Series, 'Taking Fire.'" (Discovery Blog, Discovery Corporate, September 13, 2016), <https://corporate.discovery.com/blog/2016/09/13/experience-the-front-lines-of-war-like-never-before-in-discoverys-all-new-series-taking-fire/>.

⁴⁶ Stephanie Merry, "'Taking Fire' Uses Helmet Cam Footage to Give a Rare Look at War in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, n.d., https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/09/20/taking-fire-uses-helmet-cam-footage-to-give-a-rare-look-at-war-in-afghanistan/?utm_term=.9a75858aaea9.

⁴⁷ Bancake. "AMA Request: The Guy/Guys Who Started Funker530," *Reddit*, August 30, 2014, <https://redd.it/2f0ghu>.

Chapter Two: Lifetime Fits into the Wartime Schedule: *Army Wives* and All that Melodrama Allows

Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so.
Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*⁴⁸

Jeanine Basinger's analysis of WWII combat genres includes a chapter devoted to "variations of genre," the first of which includes the "women's film variation." She writes, "In genre terms, the women's film and the WWII combat film are seemingly diametrically opposed to one another."⁴⁹ Men in combat films, "even though they are in a war environment," writes Basinger, "are free to move about or, if trapped, to make plans of active resistance," while the protagonists in women's films are passive, taking their "restrictive condition of femininity with them no matter where they go." Additionally, the women's film is "flexible," and does not restrict itself to rigid generic identifiers in the ways that combat films do, because of their perceived "linkage to real historical events." Thus, we can think of the combat film and the "women's film," as Basinger insists on calling it, as together forming a kind of genre binarism, where one is informed by the other, their definitions and identifiers often understood by their marked difference, usually dictated by broader gender norms.

In terms of war narratives, the "women's film variation," typically takes the shape of a home-front narrative. And while the combat genre often functions as the more dominant visual and cultural vehicle for our perceptions of real wars, very rarely is this counterpart considered demonstrative or appropriate for inclusion within any kind of war media canon. This is largely because in its typical form, as Basinger has made clear, the

“women’s” film or the homefront variation is often coded as feminine, focused not on the physical and emotional turmoil of those shipped off, but on the women and families who suffer through a grueling deployment period marked by waiting and absence. Indeed, “the defining feature of American war narratives,” writes Susan Jeffords, “is that they are a ‘man’s story,’ from which women are generally excluded.” Jeffords’ *The Remasculinization of America* focuses on popular representations of the Vietnam War during the conflict and thereafter in the late seventies and eighties. Her central argument that “gender is the matrix through which Vietnam is read” has remained arduously intact in the ways that the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts continue to be represented in popular media. Here, too, political narratives become redistributed and retold through a “reaffirmation of gender,”⁵⁰ marking foreign and domestic strife as an arena not in which the Iraq and Afghanistan civilian experience is contemplated, but wherein the state of the U.S. male and American masculinity is placed on center stage.

This holds true in the combat shows discussed in the previous chapter, where the depiction of male soldiers is often portrayed at odds with their government, their place of station, their girlfriends and wives back home, and even at times their own bodies. Rarely are the intricacies of these relationships explored or developed in meaningful ways beyond the scope of male pain. When the reversal is told, those not directly or intentionally inside the scope of combat, it is never taken as seriously. Combat shows, and the critical attention paid to them, very much operate on the notion that nothing is in fact as noteworthy or significant as a man at war.

While combat shows like *Generation Kill* and *Off to War* have received a fair amount of both critical and scholarly attention, this chapter will focus on their historical and current counterpart in the homefront genre. Perhaps most significantly, the “women’s film” variation “unlike the combat film, cannot be easily identified by one set of generic

expectations,” according to Basinger. “After it is identified as being about a woman, it can go in many directions.” This can be seen especially in television, where the variation narrative is found in forms ranging from the melodrama, the soap opera, and the sitcom, taking place both on the home-front and in combat zones. While the premise of combat programming inherently contains almost exclusively all-male casts (despite the increased presence of women in the military), the “women’s variation” focuses on women affected in various ways stateside and abroad: perspectives of mothers, wives, girlfriends, sisters, nurses, doctors, newly employed, newly alone, etc. These narratives also typically exist in long-form narrative. Combat shows usually appears as limited-run mini-series whereas home-front series employ serial strategies, lasting multiple years and seasons.

At center stage in this study is *Lifetime*’s most successful show, *Army Wives*, which lasted a full seven seasons between 2007-2014. At various times within these years, it was the only show on television that explicitly dealt with ongoing US conflicts abroad as a main backdrop. While given very little critical attention, *Army Wives* incorporated some surprising and relevant topics. Season One depicted a version of the Pat Tillman case where a wife finds out her husband died due to friendly fire rather than the initial reports of enemy fire. Another wife attempts to hide a surrogate pregnancy – a very common choice among military wives, and a returned soldier with PTSD takes a wife hostage amidst a shootout on the military base. I argue *Army Wives* has worked throughout its seasonal arc to address topical matters and must therefore be taken seriously as a home-front variation in its efforts to translate the war in a domestic sense.

I will also examine other war variations leading up to the Lifetime series in order to further analyze non-combat formulas and their functions as they have interacted with prior US conflicts. The first of these is *Major Dad* (1989-1993), a CBS sitcom that depicted the humorous and sometimes not so humorous scenarios of a single mom marrying a

marine during the onslaught of scattered deployments in the mid 90's. I then look at ABC's quality drama, *China Beach* (1988-1991), which was one of the "first television programs to be set entirely during the Vietnam War in Vietnam,"⁵¹ and later syndicated on the Lifetime Network. The series focused on a coastal military hospital in a similar fashion to *M*A*S*H* but focused on a group of primarily female nurses stationed there. Both *Major Dad* and *China Beach* used the masculine constructs of war to showcase interesting female leads and counter positions to dominant patriarchal military culture, illustrating a history of entertainment television bridging divides between war narratives and strict gender norms, while also creating designated formulas in which to construct popular home-front narratives of war.

Ultimately, I aim to use *Army Wives* and the women's film variation as an intervention into contemporary television scholarship by highlighting their unique capabilities to depict the war narratives. Lauren Rabinowitz has pointed out that daytime soaps failed to address topical issues in their time slots during Vietnam and the Gulf War. "Soap producers contended that, unlike live sports events like Super Bowl, their schedule of taping productions up to six weeks in advance made it difficult to comment directly on changing world events," writes Rabinowitz.⁵² Lifetime's decision to create a show exclusively about people dealing with the war abroad in its contemporary moment represents a major shift within the history of the soap and in television in general. Finally! A war so interminable and normalized, it fits into the everydayness and routine a good soap requires.

This chapter will then examine the ways in which *Army Wives* succeeded as an unlikely format to address and engage with our contemporary wars. It will utilize the history of the home-front variation on television and the treatment of female audiences and "non-quality" TV to explore ways in which the series became highly compatible with the

ongoing nature of the war and its capacity to engage a home-front audience as US troops remained indefinitely deployed.

CHINA BEACH (1988), AND MAJOR DAD (1989): A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOAPY WARS

Major Dad, which aired on CBS from 1989 to 1993, was a sitcom starring Gerald McRaney as a new husband and stepdad to a family of four women, who happened to be on a fictional marine training base. Wife Polly is a liberal “pro-peace” journalist who storms into his office in the first episode to question the major about his pro-military beliefs, later writing an anti-war opinion piece disparaging the base and Major MacGillis’s job. Somehow, in true sitcom form, the major proposes by the end of the episode. The arc of the series is then composed around the arrival of this stern military man as he moves into an ultra-feminine home with his new wife and her three daughters. Most episodes deal with the cracking away of his rigid routines in place of a more loving and flexible lifestyle. Or the flipside occurs where his stern demeanor comes in handy with things like scaring off teenage boyfriends and enforcing homework schedules.

The series aired for four seasons during what should have been a largely peaceful time in American foreign policy. Before the Gulf War, the sitcom dealt with a fictional U.S. intervention in Costa Negra where the Major was deployed at the end of one episode only to return five minutes into the next. The prospect of combat for the Major and his goofy protégé, Lieutenant Gene, is discussed below in a bit where combat is likened to a problem a child must work to conceal:

LIEUTENANT GENE: Wow! My first combat! Wait ‘til I tell my folks.

MAJOR DAD: Now lieutenant, this is highly secret information.

LT. GENE: Oh no.

MAJOR DAD: Problem?

LT. GENE: I call my mom every Friday night. The woman can tell if I’m hiding something just by the tone of my voice. If I haven’t made up my bed, if I’m not regular, if I’m about to storm the shores of Costa Negra.

The serious implication of military intervention is reduced here and rendered downright silly when the lieutenant must deal with keeping it from his mother, aligning it with making the bed or an embarrassing physical ailment like intestinal irregularity – things which sons must shamefully allow their mothers to oversee and manage. The humor lies in the juxtaposition of the domestic and the military inside the same joke, where the mundane trials of the lieutenant serve for an inevitable emasculation before he ships out, condensing the prospect of military intervention as naïve and innocent while securing his role as goofy and loveable despite his future in warfare.

Major Dad almost exclusively relies on this ‘masculine-as-emasculated’ formula throughout its entire run. "We thought: Let's take someone who has trained his whole life [to be a fighting man] and put him basically in a desk job," Rick Hawkins, executive producer, said of the sitcom before 1990: "We thought we could find a lot of humor in this element." This humor eventually had to be put on hold, or at least reworked, when President Bush ordered troops to Saudi Arabia in August of 1990, just as *Major Dad* was about to begin its second season. The deployment prompted producers to create multiple script changes in order to address the conflict, making *Major Dad* one of the only fictional television shows to directly incorporate an ongoing war. "We have established a certain reality with these characters that I think has been accepted by our audience, so we had to address it," Hawkins told the *LA Times* before Episode 16 of Season Two, "Over Here," aired on CBS on February 4, 1991, in which we find the major contemplating a transfer out of his desk job in Virginia to join troops on the ground in Saudi Arabia.⁵³ The episode utilized a subtle shift in tone, beginning with a voice-over from the major's wife, Polly, contemplating the effects of the war across the country. But, as Lauren Rabinovitz noted, it ended in typical sitcom fashion, using a fight over bedroom space between the youngest two daughters to mirror the conflicts abroad and by allowing the Major to stay on base,

highlighting the importance of domestic positions within the military. “All right, let’s face it: it’s boring, but we are not in the Marine Corps merely for our own personal satisfaction,” says the major’s female secretary, Gunner, to dissuade the major from making an order for a transfer. “We are here to serve our country, whatever we are called upon to do.” The much-anticipated episode ends with the whole family sitting on the living room couch, a ripped teddy bear and a dented globe in the hands of the daughters, representative of their fight and present ceasefire, and a contented and appreciative major, who ultimately chooses the familial and the domestic over the front lines. Rabinovitz understands *Major Dad* as part of a formula and, at times, its own epistemology of wartime culture:

Television authorized the limits of a discussion not simply through the contents of news coverage and political analysis but by structuring the war as a discourse for feminine pleasure across programming: it wrapped the war in buttons and bows and soap opera woes. For U.S. women, already socially conditioned not to talk or be concerned about governmental politics and military maneuvers, the television feminization of patriotism serves as a disciplinary effort to eschew open political debate and discussion about military and government policies during the Persian Gulf War months.⁵⁴

By encouraging a passive female voice alongside a sympathetic military institution, questions of conflict are recalibrated to fit inside, in some cases, a literal marriage bed, establishing an operative discourse that presumes a limited level of engagement. Polly’s character exists solely in the home despite working for a newspaper, whereas the major is depicted both on the base and back at the house. Her interactions with foreign affairs thus consist of the major returning from his desk job followed by a bit of comedic push and pull bit where she must extract knowledge from him, usually pertaining to whether or not he must leave. Indeed, the main concern of *Major Dad*’s treatment of the Gulf War surrounds the question of the major’s leaving, not *why* he might have to or for *what* purpose. Combat and U.S. military intervention are reduced to a stagnant, non-debatable construct, the inevitable risk of marrying a marine.

Impenetrably self-enclosed at times, *Major Dad* established a gendered, domesticated structure of sitcom banter, even as real bombs began dropping over Iraq. Yet out of all the soaps and other “women’s TV” of the 90’s, *Major Dad* was the only program to even acknowledge Operation Desert Storm. “No one in *All My Children*’s Pine Valley even seemed to remember that a character had been conveniently written out of the show in August when he joined the marines and shipped off to Saudi Arabia” (Rabinovitz 201). Indeed, few women’s television shows ever acknowledge any U.S. conflicts, especially ongoing ones. The most prominent example of those that did, beyond *Major Dad*, was *China Beach*, an ABC drama series set place in Vietnam within an American military hospital. The show went on air in 1988 and lasted four seasons, before being canceled in 1991, depicting the war more than a decade after American troops exited the country. Still, the series was set in Vietnam amidst the conflict. Its primary focus was on female nurses working at the hospital and their day-to-day interactions with American soldiers and Vietnamese citizens. The series’ focus on a military hospital echoes *M*A*S*H*, but takes a drastic turn where almost everyone working in the hospital is female as opposed its obvious *M*A*S*H*, with its majority male cast and token female character, Margaret “Hot Lips” Houlihan.

The very first episode of *China Beach* depicts Dana Delany’s character learning of the death of a friend at the hands of a female Vietnamese soldier, only later having to help the same woman deliver a baby. The episode ends with Delany’s character allowing the woman to escape the hospital, baby in hand, under the cover of night. The series ultimately earned acclaim through its unique perspective and catapulted Dana Delany’s career, receiving an Emmy for Best Actress both in 1989 and 1992. *Vogue* wrote of the show at the time:

The women live in a world without Tampax; they fall into unlikely friendships, like fellow countrymen stumbling onto land. They don't really belong together, but they are together. Much of *China Beach* is shot and lit like a horror movie. The show is full of macabre jokes that are supposed to be sophisticated. The doctors exhibit an awful lot of *M*A*S*H*-like elan from behind their blood-spattered masks. Occasionally, this outre posturing grows tiresome. But what makes many scenes silly and excessive is also what makes *China Beach* great – the view. The show is more than a convenient package handed out to the *Cagney & Lacey* crowd. *China Beach* is the Vietnam War seen by outsiders on the inside, by non-combatants, women, who cannot understand, and so must make it all up.⁵⁵

Understanding *China Beach* as a depiction of Vietnam “seen by outsiders on the inside” is apt appraisal from the fashion magazine. The reviewer, Cathleen Shine, often takes pleasure in its more ridiculous and “macabre” elements while ultimately celebrating its off-centered positionality, understanding the female “outsider” space as valuable in its own sense; she concludes, “what makes many scenes silly and excessive is also what makes *China Beach* great.”

China Beach also was symptomatic of particularly apt in relation to “women’s television” in terms of its syndication history. Despite its critical appeal, the ratings were consistently poor during its initial network run. Lifetime Channel revived the series in syndicated reruns after its 1992 cancelation, displaying what Jane Feuer considered to be part of Lifetime’s move to “recycle and reposition quality women’s TV of the 1980’s for the Lifetime target audience of the 1990s.”⁵⁶ Feuer understands this programming shift as a devaluation and a sanitization of “cutting edge” feminism at the turn of the decade.

Evoking Raymond Williams, she analyzes Lifetime’s network “flow” and observes:

During the 1992 rebroadcast of *thirtysomething*, a promo ran repeatedly that made a tongue-in-cheek, point by point comparison between *China Beach* and *L.A. Law* ‘back to back on Lifetime.’ The promo stated that both shows deal with ‘life’s little problems.’ The fact that *China Beach* was a ‘woman’s show’ that dealt with blood, war, and death in an often grimly serious manner was lost on Lifetime.

Here, the nuance and emotional heft of *China Beach* is repackaged to fit into what many scholars have considered to be a particularly kind of non-feminism motif in Lifetime’s

promotional agenda. The network that considered itself “television for women” ultimately refused to invoke feminist ideals or promises. Therefore, when *China Beach* earned a second life on the channel, its more progressive connotations were re-signified to fit a more “convenient” *Lifetime* package.

China Beach and *Major Dad* used the masculine constructs of war to showcase interesting female leads and counter positions to dominant patriarchal military culture, illustrating a history of entertainment television bridging divides between war narratives and strict gender norms. Both garnered space and reworked earlier formulas to construct popular and varied war narratives.

ARMY WIVES AS MILITARY MELODRAMA

In 2004, ABC launched their soapy hit, *Desperate Housewives*, featuring Teri Hatcher and Felicity Huffman as two suburban mothers with a lot of bad blood. Almost a year later, Bravo began its now pervasive reality series format, *The Real Housewives*. Consequently, by the late 2000s, the term “wife,” when it appeared on television, was synonymous with drama, triviality, and female hostility. That’s why when *Army Wives* premiered on Lifetime in 2007, it was all the more surprising to find a cast of female characters that seemingly only lived to support one another. Its very title, *Army Wives*, played a rather intentional misdirection on audiences expecting the usual “womanly strife” and instead actively played against the housewife playbook. The women on this show have larger problems than organizing charity events and planning lunch dates, their lives consumed instead with the military: awaiting spouses to return from deployments and fitting in with the community at large. Most of the women are not wealthy, and in fact are much the opposite, usually supporting three too many children with minimal help from

government stipends. There's no money for nannies, hardly enough to buy rounds for one another at the local bar.

The first episode of the series centers around Roxy, played by Sally Peterson, as she meets her soon-to-be husband while working as a bartender. She's a single mother with two young sons from two different fathers. In a similar fashion to *Major Dad*, it takes less than a week for a Trevor, a private in the Army, to propose, moving Roxy and her kids to the fictional army base in South Carolina where the entirety of the series is set. Trevor's entrance, like the major's, is staged as a welcome solution to what is framed as an incomplete or disjointed family unit. While Roxy is anxious at first upon moving to Fort Marshall, where the base causes her to feel temporarily inadequate as an untraditional mother, she's soon comforted by the series' other major players as they too share similar feelings, positing Army life as an untraditional and unnatural lifestyle in and of itself. When we meet them, Pamela (Brigid Brannagh), a wife of an elite sniper, has three kids and is also pregnant with twins in a planned surrogacy she is hiding from the rest of the base; Denise (Catherine Bell) is dealing with the stress of a husband that is currently deployed while trying to control violent outbursts from her teenage son; Joan (Wendy Davis) flips the script as a lieutenant colonel so her husband, Roland (Sterling K. Brown) takes a role in the inner "wife" circle; lastly, Claudia Joy (Kim Delaney) functions as something of a matriarch, as her husband is the highest rank of the group and she holds political sway over base procedurals.

The group of women (and Roland) are deeply supportive of one another as they attempt to retain a sense of normalcy on base. They constantly babysit for one another on a moment's notice and meet at the local bar in almost every episode. When combat does appear, its consequences are pointed at the home rather than a larger geopolitical frame. In Season 3, Episode 16, "Shrapnel and Alibis," Joan has to say goodbye to her newborn baby

for a new deployment in Iraq. Upon arriving, in one of the rare instances of actual combat depicted on *Army Wives*, she is involved in an explosion that causes a piece of shrapnel to damage her eyes. The tension for the following episodes revolve round whether or not her recovery surgery will allow her to see her baby daughter again. She ultimately recovers and the violence she experienced is resolved as soon as she sees her child again. In the same episode, Pamela has noticed that her husband, who has recently returned from Iraq, has intricate burn marks on his shoulders. She suspects he's been tortured and when she confronts him about it, he lies and gaslights her to supposedly avoid sharing any confidential information. "You can't tell the little woman anything because she's not in the big boy's club!" she ironically asserts in anger. Though *Army Wives* posits controversial topics like torture and Iraqi insurgent groups, the issues, in similar fashion to *Major Dad*, remain enclosed as singular familial events, where Iraq and Afghanistan are not implicated in the narrative arc. So while this excludes any exploration of geopolitical strife, *Army Wives* stages the interiority of the women's lives as of equal significance.

As mentioned earlier, while on air *Army Wives* received little of the enthusiastic attention television in general was earning in the mid 2000s. Airing at the same time with shows like *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* on premium cable, *Army Wives* was not a part of the third golden age canon and therefore critical reviews were rare. *The New York Times* bothered with a Season Two review back in 2008 but that was the only instance the *Times* ever acknowledged the show's presence. The *AV Club*, a website that reviews all kinds of media in a way as savvy and self-aware as its geek moniker would suggest, reviewed Season Five in 2011, four years after the show debuted. In their TV review column where the show finally appeared, *AV Club* included this disclaimer:

The Internet has made TV criticism more prominent, but the kinds of shows TV critics write about - serialized dramas and single-camera comedies - are rarely the kinds of shows that become popular with a mass audience. Every week, AV Club

is going to drop in on one of the top-rated programs in the nation, one that we don't normally cover. What makes these shows popular? Should we be covering them more often? Are our preconceived notions about quality not necessarily following popularity justified, or are we jumping to conclusions? This week, Phil Nugent checks out one of the top 10 cable shows, *Army Wives*. Next week, John Teti visits cable's second highest rated show, *Pawn Stars*.⁵⁷

The simple fact that they needed a disclaimer to explain and justify the presence of *Army Wives* on their site speaks volumes. Their self-effacing question, "Should we be covering them more often?" should be answered, I argue, with a resounding yes. Yet despite their preemptive understanding of the lack of attention "non-quality" shows receive as potentially unjustifiable, it does not stop the reviewer from completely eviscerating the show. The review itself is almost entirely negative, calling *Army Wives*, "boring," "all clichés," "less enraging than narcoleptic," as well as "utterly vacuous," and "unfelt."

The scholarship that does exist around *Army Wives* is almost exclusively negative. Mary Douglas Vavrus writes in 2013 that, "while *Army Wives* touches weekly on difficult subjects, such as injured painkillers addictions and marital infidelity among spouses separated by war, it also makes the larger context for these problems glaringly absent."⁵⁸ Indeed, while the show's characters often express frustration as husbands and partners head out for deployment one week and return stoic and uncommunicative the next week, the show largely posits an enduring, if sometimes frustrated, uncritical sense of patriotism. Iraq and Afghanistan are treated interchangeably as vague deployment points that constantly need to be "dealt with" for the sake of our safety but are rarely mentioned in any detail or nuance regarding even the missions and types of soldiers being sent, let alone the issues at stake in the regions. As time passes we don't get a sense that the women are frustrated with the US military policies but rather are exasperated by the ongoing and ceaseless nature of it, often having to come to terms with the many conflicts abroad as a "necessary evil." And while Joan and Roland are played by black actors, the series asserts a generally

heteronormative white middle-class society, despite the historical diversity of the military. Scholar Liora Elias has written about *Army Wives*' take on the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and its homonormative illustration of a happy lesbian couple, content with their placement and newly found, magically acquired equality on the base.⁵⁹

The series, on the surface, depicts an ultimately pro-war and pro-American narrative of military operations despite the increasingly negative opinion many Americans may have about US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. While Vavrus qualifies that Lifetime's predominantly female audience "should not be underestimated." She argues that *Army Wives* "deploys the device of marriage to frame the military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan so as to encourage acquiescence to these missions' continually shifting ends." The *OED* defines "acquiescence" as a "passive assent *to*, or compliance *with*, proposals or measures; acceptance of something undesirable." In her extensive analysis of *Army Wives*, Vavrus illustrates the implicit messages present within the show's understanding of war; however, she does very little to counteract these points with the multitude of readings possible from the "predominantly female" audience. Her criticisms ultimately echo those of soap operas throughout the '80s and '90s whose female audiences were consistently thought of as mindless and passive, or in the *AV Club*'s word, "narcoleptic."

Has *Army Wives* fallen victim to those clichéd tropes of soap audiences of yesteryear? In her book, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*, Charlotte Brunson compiles a list of blurbs criticizing audiences for the popular British soap, *Crossroads*. "These were the ones with the worst symptoms of withdrawal pains," writes Hillary Kingley of *Crossroads* fans in *Sunday People* in 1979. "For them this four times a week shot of soap opera had become as habit forming as a drug." Later, Peter McKay wrote of *Crossroads* in *Evening Standard*, "People who become addicted to a serial as bad as *Crossroads* are people who would not fight for a seat on the bus." Both reviews - or rather,

insults - illustrate fans of soaps as diseased in some way from whom *Crossroads* was an addiction. Additionally, similar to those with actual addictions, fans are accused of lacking some form of moral strength or will of character. Reviews of soaps, or soap-like shows echo and encapsulate the outdated embrace of media effects arguments, where audiences are purely passive and television is invasive in every sense.⁶⁰

It's important to note that *Army Wives* promotes itself as a primetime drama. It also directly positions itself in opposition with other television wives, attempting to achieve more legitimacy than a daytime soap, utilizing, as the *AV Club* also noted, subtle acting techniques and more subdued plotlines in place of more overt and identifiable melodrama. Its distinction also includes its depiction of issues in the military rather than with other women, intentionally avoiding female villain characters as a way to avoid soapy classifications.

Yet I argue that *Army Wives* is indeed a version of a primetime soap. In her essay, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," Tania Modleski refers to Laura Mulvey's idea that spectatorship involves identifying with main male protagonist, "resulting in the spectator becoming the 'representative of power.'" Modleski asserts that soaps dismantle this placement of power:

Instead of giving us 'one powerful ideal ego...who can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator can,' soaps present us with numerous limited egos, each in conflict with one another and continually thwarted in its attempts to 'control events' because of the inadequate knowledge of other peoples' plans, motivations, and schemes.⁶¹

In the case of *Army Wives*, there are "numerous limited egos" amongst the wives themselves, but the conflict primarily derives from the military, whose policies and sudden decisions are a constant source of tension, agony at times, confusion, and ongoing concern for the women. Therefore, in many ways, the military takes the place of the villain female

nemesis, asserting power and ‘controlling events’ within the women’s lives, allowing viewers to feel the “feminine powerlessness” pervasive in traditional soaps.

Particularly with its slow-paced ‘three steps forward, two steps back’ formula and its general attempt to portray housewives, *Army Wives* undoubtedly functions in many ways like a soap opera. I work to make this classification clear because if we understand our television programming as viewed in gendered ways, understanding *Army Wives* as a soap allows us to frame this series as part of long run of women’s television programming too often swept under the rug as mindlessly dangerous for viewers.

Additionally, scholars like Elana Levine and Michael Newman have noted that the soap’s most essential quality, seriality, has been adopted by more masculine primetime dramas and heralded as “quality” television in the post-network era. Never prestige but always the grunt, the soap’s lack of inclusion within this new category despite its dedication to seriality can be blamed on what Levine and Newman call the “essential ending” where “the widely held assumption that soaps feature never-ending stories, with complications spinning off from even the resolutions that do occur” causes the narrative trajectory to read as feminine, whereas in primetime seriality, “we see a repeated valuation of the serialized narrative that successfully concludes.”⁶² An outlier among the mini-series and short docu-dramas that have been included within the sphere of “quality” amongst war related shows, *Army Wives* does not give us a tidy ending. Soldiers that do return are expected to pack up and leave again soon and wives learn to cope. The show ultimately illustrates a kind of endless relay, a constant burden with no end in sight, leaving many of its plot lines unresolved in its seventh and final season. In an interview with *The New York Post*, the executive producer, Jeff Melvoin joked about the series finale, “We didn’t last quite as long as the war had, but we came pretty close.”⁶³

WATCHING THE WIVES

To return to Vavrus's understanding of *Army Wives* as a show that encourages an "acquiescence" to military operations, how then can we understand the implications of the series without subscribing to gendered stereotypes of soap audiences? As previously established multiple times within this project, audiences have awareness to political paratexts of television as well as genre codes. Is there a way to understand fans of *Army Wives* without accusing them of some kind of passive complicity with the US military?

In *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway attempts to tackle a similar question regarding 80s mass-market romance novels. Similar in some ways to David Morley's account of BBC's *Nationwide*'s reception across different groups of people, Radway is interested in class and gender roles within society as she challenges pervasive notion that female fans of romance fiction must be taking part in some anti-feminist and uneducated pursuit, given the rather traditional agenda of the texts themselves. In order to analyze the allure of the romance novels, she separates the act of reading from the text itself, and in doing so highlights ways in which women use reading as an escape from their daily lives, further complicating the "hypodermic needle" theory by placing agency within the act of approaching a text rather than the text itself. She writes in her updated introduction that she "attempts a parallel look at the conditions organizing women's private lives and that likewise contribute to the possibility of regular romance reading."⁶⁴ In an effort to understand why certain women are driven to such traditional and arguably oppressive texts, Radway points to other factors within a woman's life that contribute to her decisions and her own understanding of leisure and in doing so makes space for provocation and subversion of daily life within the very act of reading romance fiction.

It is this space for provocation that I would like to leave open and available in the case of *Army Wives*. What elements of the series provide qualities of escape and relief for

viewers, both in and out of the military? To what extent does it allow for fantasies to be curated among fans? Particularly those that might imagine a world where a looming never-ending war is a reality better fit for the fictional world of a soap opera rather than real life? In this section, I examine the responses on an online messaging board reacting to the series and take a cue from Janice Radway in order to problematize the notion that fans of *Army Wives* must be exercising a conservative, misinformed agenda. Instead I aim to uncover reasons why veterans and military spouses themselves tune in despite its glaring inaccuracies.

A survey was taken in March 2011 on the military forum “Military SOS” or “Military Significant Other Support”⁶⁵ asking if members think *Army Wives* is a realistic view of spouses’ lives. The forum advertised itself as “a support site for military spouses and significant others, open to all loved ones of military service members (active, reserve and retired).” On it could be found tips for long-distance relationships, ways to volunteer for military family advocacy programs, and even posts about getting through a divorce. The *Army Wives* thread spawned 79 votes, and of the 79 that answered, 68 voted “NO.” Despite this overwhelming majority, 42 members commented on the forum to further express their opinions on the show. Examining the responses on the messaging board reacting to the series and take a cue from Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, we might problematize the notion that fans of *Army Wives* must be exercising a conservative, misinformed agenda. In so doing, we may also uncover reasons why veterans and military spouses themselves tune in to the series despite its glaring inaccuracies.

In response to the question, “Do you think the *Army Wives* tv show is a realistic view of military spouse’s lives?” many commented with things like “not even remotely close,” or “I wish.” One member, mel524, wrote, “No, I don't think it's a true representation. However, considering most live the military life, why would we watch a

'reality' version of the show? It's supposed to be entertainment - so they're obviously going to add extra drama and other aspects that may be more of a stretch from reality." This sentiment was shared by many others who viewed *Army Wives* as strictly escapist, a series that was purposefully devoid of realistic depictions and accurate information. One responder, Bluebutterfly505, contended that she'd be "in a strait jacket by now," if her life was filled with "that much constant drama." Similar to Shine's take on *China Beach*, viewers on the messaging board express a kind of perverse sense of joy in the more absurd moments of the show. For others, enough was enough:

I watched one season, and although some of the emotions that they feel/express seem somewhat right, I feel like the overall situations are not normal lifestyles at all. Too many people think that is way military life is like. HAH! If you think the average military family lives in a GIANT house with that much disposable income, never moving, being that friendly with all the wives on base, etc. they got another thing coming.

-TickleMahPickle, One Man Wolf Pack

This person clearly couldn't make it past the first season, finding the inaccuracies of military life too hard to watch. He/she thinks the portrayal of military spouses is *too* nice; suggesting most wives are not friends with everyone. Many others also expressed frustration that no family on *Army Wives* is asked to relocate. It is not uncommon for real military families to have to move every six months to a year, yet hardly anyone is asked to move in the series; nor does it ever seem to be a cause for worry.

I always swear I'm going to stop watching because it's so ridiculous, but then I realize they're trying to cram in the entire military/Army experience into a really small group of women. That, and it's a soap opera.

-AG815, Senior Member

Here AG815 justifies watching the show by understanding it as a soap opera. This allows them to account for the "ridiculous"-ness and overlook its poor attempts at illustrating the military.

My DB who grew up on military bases and is enlisting soon always complains about the details of things, like the decorations on the uniforms of the soldiers

who informed Denise of her son's death last episode. He also says it's pretty accurate with the portrayals of infidelity. I usually roll my eyes when he mentions that part of it. I honestly have been watching the show pretty regularly since the first season and I didn't and don't watch it for the accurate portrayal; I watch it for the story and for the entertainment. If it was an accurate portrayal would it really be exciting enough to even be a good show?

-11MikesGirl21,

This real military wife airs her frustrations with her husband's complaints about the show and implies her actual life wouldn't be entertaining enough for a television series. Her husband's assertion that some of the marital infidelity that takes place on the show is in fact accurate reads like a veiled threat from her perspective and illustrates an interesting tension between the official military reality and the domestic reality on the show.

Several other posts were persistent in detailing the ways in which the show fails to include small details about ranks or misunderstands the social intricacies in general military communities. Claudia Joy's husband on the show is a commander, for example, and the fact that she befriends so many lower ranking families, frustrated several members on the forum. "Maybe I'm wrong, but most people don't personally know a general or the garrison commander and hang out with them on the weekends...at least, I know we sure don't," joked Nicole. One member commented on the rapid promotion of Pamela's newlywed Trevor who only recently enlisted when the series begins:

Wasn't he only an O5 when they met? (two star in the Navy is rear admiral upper half), I watched it off and on the 1st season. I think it's pretty off...but so is NCIS, JAG, etc.

-Beach, Senior Member

This user makes an intriguing comparison to other military dramas, outlining a general low standard for television to accurately portray the military overall and implying that their expectations for the show's accuracy are partially informed by what else is going on in television.

While this small forum post is by no means comprehensive of the entire *Army Wives* audience, it provides interesting glimpse of responses from the military community, with posts by fans of the series and those who watched a few episodes. Their critiques overwhelmingly let us know that expectations are not high for *Army Wives* to provide an accurate representation of war and contemporary military life yet the series' unrealistic quality did not prevent some forum members from becoming big fans of the show, asserting they'd rather see more drama and entertainment on their television screens than the supposedly dull reality of their actual home lives. Even military experts were happy in some cases to overlook *Army Wives*' inaccuracies, understanding and enjoying them instead as customary in military-based television.

CONCLUSION

I acknowledge that for many reasons it is impossible to pinpoint the exact cultural implications of the feminine format of the soap as it relates to the masculine genre of war. But I hope that an interrogation of this trend will shed light on attitudes regarding the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and will rectify trends in television scholarship that ignore programs like *Army Wives*.

The final episode of Season 1 of *Army Wives* entails a male soldier sporting a suicide vest to the base's local bar, where all our favorite wives routinely gather. He is not there in the name of Islam – in stark contrast to the former POW character, Brody, in the season finale of *Homeland* a few years later. Nor is he there to teach the American military a lesson, which also would require *Army Wives* to address the larger political context. Instead, the only place *Army Wives* can place its gaze is inwards. The soldier sporting the vest is there for his wife, who after opening up to her fellow female spouses about the domestic abuse she'd been suffering at the hands of her husband, has recently been

empowered enough to leave the man for someone new. Therefore, the suicide vest does not invoke some vague threat from the Middle East as expect, in fact we're not even sure if the husband in question has ever been overseas. Instead, it's there to remind us of the underlying homegrown terrorism that is toxic masculinity. The husband successfully triggers the vest, killing himself along with Claudia Joy's eldest daughter, as well as the bartender - the ultimate female comrade of the wives on base. The most violent incident then that takes place on *Army Wives* occurs at the hands of a disgruntled husband, suggesting that domestic life for these women can be as big a threat, if not bigger, than whatever war is going on elsewhere.

The characters on *Army Wives* are then trapped in what Lynne Joyrich, in an essay on soap operas, calls "an indefinitely expandable middle, lacking in beginning middle or end." This expandable middle offers no resolutions, does not posit any responsibilities in historicizing, but continues onward in an "eternally conflictual present." Such is the world of our army wives as they live and breathe on both a home and a military base in which unexpected deployments are learned to be inevitable as years run on. Its unwillingness to inquire beyond the scope of the base alongside its constant invocation of a United States at war work to illustrate Joyrich's 1988 piece on "what melodrama can allow":

Melodrama helps us place ourselves in a confusing world – its insistence on the validity of moral or experiential truths and its faiths in the reality of the stakes creates a space from which to act. The 'naiveté' associated with a feminized spectator may in fact reflect melodrama's suspicion of linguistic and cultural codes, a suspicion that now well-founded in today's loud of mobile signs and codes. While melodrama –and its female viewers – have been seen as suspect, there is something offered in this stance. Melodrama's promise of universally

legible meaning seems particularly compelling in the postmodern era, experienced by many as desperately in need of some kind of grounding.⁶⁶

It is precisely its a-historicity and unwillingness to make hard conclusions or moral statements that makes *Army Wives* so significant. Removed from the combat genre that is so entrenched in moral capital and image-making, the series' "universally legible meanings" showcases something of a relief. Similar to ways in which *China Beach*, according to 1988 *Vogue*, is "the Vietnam War seen by outsiders on the inside, by non-combatants, women, who cannot understand, and so must make it all up," *Army Wives* is Iraq and Afghanistan seen by those entirely outside of its scope. What gets "made up" is perhaps the most telling; what is being said in female absence is perhaps as loud and resounding as the bullets zooming by on HBO.

⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (Macmillan, 1978), 13–14.

⁴⁹ Basinger and Arnold, *The World War II Combat Film*, 223.

⁵⁰ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 54–86.

⁵¹ Jeffords, 2.

⁵² Lauren Rabinovitz, "Soap Opera Woes: Genre, Gender, and the Persian Gulf War," *Seeing Through the Media*. Ed. Jeffords & Rabinovitz. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), pp. 189-204.

⁵³ Dennis McDougal, "Sitcom Caught in Conflict: The War in Gulf in Dictating Changes to 'Major Dad.'" (*Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 1991).

⁵⁴ Lauren Rabinovitz, Lauren. *Seeing Through the Media*. pp. 203-204.

⁵⁵ Cathleen Shine, "TV's Women in Groups: They Work Together, They Sweat Together, They 'Care' Together." (New York: *Vogue*, September 1988).

⁵⁶ Jane Feuer, "Feminism on Lifetime: Yuppie TV for the Nineties," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 11–12, no. 3-1 (33-34) (May 1, 1994): 132–45.

⁵⁷ Phil Dyess-Nugent, "TV Review: *Army Wives*," A.V. Club, April 11, 2011, <https://tv.avclub.com/army-wives-1798167878>.

⁵⁸ Mary Douglas Vavrus, "Lifetime's *Army Wives*, or I Married the Media-Military-Industrial Complex," *Women's Studies in Communication* 36, no. 1 (2013): 92–112.

⁵⁹ Liora Elias, "'Don't Ask Don't Tell' and its Repeal in Showtime's *The L Word* and Lifetime's *Army Wives*," *American Militarism on the Small Screen*, ed. Froula and Takacs, (Routledge, 2016).

⁶⁰ Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes*, 12–18.

⁶¹ Tania, Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, ed. Brunsdon and Spigel, (Open University Press. 2nd Ed. 2008), 29-40.

⁶² Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 90.

⁶³ Andrea Morabito, "'Army Wives' Gets a Rare Series Sendoff," NY Post, March 12, 2014, <https://nypost.com/2014/03/12/army-wives-gets-a-rare-series-sendoff/>.

⁶⁴ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 1-18.

⁶⁵ "Army Wives Realistic or Not." SOS: Military Spousal Support. <http://www.militarysos.com/forum/entertainment/450648-army-wives-realistic-not.html>

⁶⁶ Lynne Joyrich, "All That Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 6, no. 1 (16) (January 1, 1988): 128-53.

Chapter Three: So Proudly She Hails: Combat, Melodrama, and *Homeland*

On October 11, 2015, Showtime's CIA drama, *Homeland*, aired the second episode of its fifth season. The episode, entitled, "The Tradition of Hospitality," follows the protagonist of the series, Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) as she travels to the Syrian/Lebanese border. Carrie is a CIA analyst with bipolar disorder, though she is on a "break" from the agency in this season. She is there instead to gain assets in order to prevent a potential Hezbollah attack on a refugee camp on behalf of the non-profit organization that funds the camp. The episode involves a suicide bomber, a massive explosion, and a Russian spy getting cozy with Saul Berenson (Mandy Patinkin, who is CIA chief at this point in the series). Yet even amongst these unexpected occurrences, what makes this episode stand out, in a series otherwise filled with bombings and spies, is a subtle set detail. In the beginning of the episode, Carrie walks through the camp and we briefly see Arabic graffiti on the walls of battered homes and buildings. An Arabic reader would be able to decipher the words "Homeland is racist" sprayed onto them.

The self-proclaimed "Arabian Street Artists," Heba Amin, Caram Kapp, and Don Karl were all hired by Showtime to create "pro-Assad" graffiti for the series. With no Arabic speakers staffed on the production of *Homeland*, a show that had depicted several Arab characters and countries up to that point, no one caught the message before the final cut went to air. "For four seasons, and entering its fifth, *Homeland* has maintained the dichotomy of the photogenic, mainly white, mostly American protector versus the evil and backwards Muslim threat," the artists stated in a blog post, calling the show racist for its "inaccurate, undifferentiated and highly biased depiction of Arabs, Pakistanis, and Afghans, as well as its gross misrepresentations of the cities of Beirut, Islamabad- and the

so-called Muslim world in general.” They also snuck in other messages in the episode like, “There is no Homeland,” and “This show does not represent the views of the artists.”

While the very success of the protest would suggest the show was in fact proven to be racist, or at least lazy, it did very little to affect its viewership. In fact, throughout its run, starting with its 2011 debut, *Homeland* has produced divisive conversations amidst significant and loyal fandom. In 2013, *The Guardian* wrote that the series “isn’t just bad TV, it peddles the worst lies about US foreign policy.” Hitting a similar note, a 2014 *Washington Post* review called *Homeland* “the most bigoted show on television.”⁶⁷ Yet despite very heated backlash from some prestigious media outlets, *Homeland* has built a large following. Perhaps most significant, in a bizarre illustration of Neil Postman’s “amusing ourselves to death,” President Barack Obama called it “one of his favorite shows” in a profile for *People* magazine back in 2011.⁶⁸ Since then it was reported that actor Damian Lewis, who plays Agent Nicholas Brody, even sent the president a signed DVD boxset, writing “From one Muslim to another,” in a display of fictional worlds colliding with the political worlds they set out to depict. Lewis is not himself Muslim but his character, Brody, converts to Islam on the show. The joke is meant to make light of the racist and Islamophobic far-right conspiracy theories that Obama must secretly be Muslim, if not also working for Al Qaeda, like Brody’s character is.⁶⁹

Most notably, Stephen Colbert, a self-proclaimed fan of the series, responded directly to the graffiti artists’ message on a segment of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*:

“It might not accurately portray Muslims. But that doesn’t make it racist. Because the show doesn’t accurately portray anything. Take Carrie. You really think that bipolar disorder is all about solving international conspiracies to the sounds of jazz? No! It’s mostly feeling so depressed all day that you end up binge-watching *Homeland*....Don’t get me started on remotely detonating the vice-president’s pacemaker – that’s not a thing!... So graffiti men, if you’re upset the show is full of

Arab characters trying to double cross everyone, maybe you shouldn't have double crossed everyone with these Arabic characters.”

The tirade ultimately culminates in an ardent defense of the show, where ludicrous plot points - like the assassination of the vice president by way of “hacking” into his pacemaker device in season two – undercut our expectation for the show to be realistic in other aspects. He justifies the inaccuracies of Muslim representation by throwing it in with inaccuracies that have always been implicit within high-stakes drama series, mixing them all in the same grab bag of trivial television constructs, essentially saying, “It’s far-fetched already, so why does it matter?” In Colbert’s defense of *Homeland*, the functionality of a pacemaker and the morality of the Muslim population as a whole are rendered interchangeable.

My point here is to illustrate the strident, often tense ways in which audiences have reacted to *Homeland*, which has been both championed and despised since its debut. No matter where you fall, it is hard to deny that the allure of Carrie Mathison, Saul Berenson, and their wide-ranging pursuits is potent and at times, inflammatory. *Homeland* took home “Best Drama Series” at both the Emmys and the Golden Globes in 2011, its first season, while Claire Danes won an Emmy and a Golden Globe for “Best Actress in a Drama.” She won again for both award shows in 2012. Still going strong and slated for eight seasons, the peerless *Homeland* has become one of the most successful, critically acclaimed dramas on television – a series that dramatizes the war on terror and ongoing conflicts in places ranging from the Middle East to Europe to the U.S.

Unlike other series discussed in this study, *Homeland* has been written about extensively in both academia and popular media outlets. An entire issue of *Cinema Journal* showcased the show in 2015 and just recently, *The Los Angeles Review of Books* featured a piece on the series entitled, “Is *Homeland* Still Racist?”⁷⁰ Instead of focusing on *Homeland*’s politics or ever-changing paranoias, as others have done, I will attempt to

answer why we ask so much of *Homeland* to begin with. To refer back to Colbert, “the show doesn’t accurately portray anything,” yet scholars like James Castonguay have argued that *Homeland* “successfully exploits post-9/11 insecurities, psychological trauma, and narrative complexity to produce ‘quality’ television propaganda for the Obama administration.”⁷¹ On the one hand, the show is explicitly inaccurate, according to Colbert, yet on the other, it functions as “successful” propaganda. How do we account for this discrepancy?

By presenting Carrie Mathison as the ultimate spy heroine in our post-9/11 society, *Homeland* intentionally inserts soapy qualities and into what is otherwise a counter-terrorism thriller. I argue that the dichotomy embodies a fissure in reception caused by this unique blend of generic identifiers, where *Homeland* is both a combat show *and* a homefront show. Given that the traditional male dominated combat form typically denotes “quality” and is often perceived as a way to “learn” about wars whereas the “women’s” home-front variation is defined by its very absence from these male spaces, connotative instead of hyperbole and melodrama, *Homeland* occupies an ambiguous middle ground. The following will analyze the ways in which *Homeland* insists on gendering the negotiations of fictionalized foreign and domestic affairs, much of which is literally and figuratively embedded in the character and body of Carrie Mathison. I argue that the series illustrates ways in which popular war narratives inevitably fall back on traditional gender borders in order to understand American conflicts despite the increasingly changing nature of warfare and our growing expectation regarding what television *can do*.

WOMEN IN COMBAT

In her discussion of combat genre variations, Jeanine Basinger examines the rather rare occurrence of “women in combat” films during WWII. After a close examination of

So Proudly We Hail (1943), *Cry Havoc* (1943), and several postwar films like *Skirts Ahoy!* (1952) and *Flight Nurse* (1953), Basinger notes that the depiction of women on the frontline functions as a telling “merger” between combat films and “women’s” films. She argues:

Using established generic conventions to reflect new issues is a part of the evolutionary process. As the evolution takes place over a period of years, it is to be expected that the issues must shift. However, it is not as expected that within the evolution, an incompatible genre like the woman’s film might comfortably bond with it. The fact that it can happen helps explain genre. The woman’s combat film – the merger of two opposite genres - clarifies the existence and concerns of both, and also proves that both genres exist in audience’s minds.⁷²

The films illustrate an intentional maneuvering of standard genre codes, where the woman doing the “man’s job” is the designated plot point, or the “big surprise,” as Basinger writes, which everything else in each film centers around and responds to. The women *being* women in combat is the issue at hand, rather than the combat itself. The intentionality of this gender reversal works to bolster the existence of the genres it combines, highlighting “women in combat” as something of an inherent *misplacement*. And despite being in combat zones, Basinger argues that the female characters are ultimately faced with the same restrictions and tensions found in women’s films, where they must inevitably make self-effacing decisions, unable to have what men can have. In *So Proudly We Hail*, a combat nurse weds a male soldier against the advice of her female commander, forgoing her military duties by “giving in” to her femininity and “falling in love.” Her husband ultimately dies in combat and she is left in a state of depression, only able to recover upon returning home. Basinger posits, “If she leaves the combat zone (the man’s world), she can live again in her rightful place, the woman’s world. Thus, the film offers liberation and says be true to it, and simultaneously punishes it and says it will kill you.” The “women in combat” variation, then, embodies an interesting dilemma. While it works to highlight the exclusivity of “a man’s world,” perhaps even interrogates it in certain instances, it must

also be defined through its own restrictiveness, reverting to melodrama when women reach where they cannot venture.

Basinger's brief survey of the small handful of WWII films mentioned above is dwarfed by her exhaustive examination of over one hundred WWII male-dominated combat films, beginning with *A Yank on the Burma Road* (January 1942) and ending with *The Final Countdown* (July, 1980). Rare as it was during and after WWII, the women-in-combat variation remains an infrequent and sparsely deployed formula across film and television even today. The few examples that come to mind are *Private Benjamin* (1980), a comedy starring Goldie Hawn, *She's in the Army Now* (1981), an ABC made-for-television movie starring Jamie Lee Curtis, *G.I. Jane* (1997), a Ridley Scott action film starring Demi Moore, and *Cadet Kelly* (2002), a coming-of-age Disney movie starring Hillary Duff.² As evident by their very titles - where female names and pronouns are juxtaposed with military titles - the gender reversal remains the key element at play even within these more contemporary films. Additionally, with the exception of *G.I. Jane*, the films are largely comedic, working off gendered stereotypes in light, playful ways. For instance, Goldie Hawn plays a spoiled gold-digger in *Private Benjamin* who must join the army for financial reasons after her wealthy fiancé dies just before their wedding. The success of the film led to a CBS sitcom of the same name (starring Lorna Patterson as Private Judy Benjamin) that aired for three seasons (1981-1983) over thirty-nine half-hour episodes. The films are also primarily training films that take place in neutral spaces outside of warzones. The daily struggles are then not combat but the demands of military life, usually exemplified through the domineering gaze of an onerous drill sergeant. Only *G.I.*

² While there are many films and television series that depict women in fictional and/ or fantastical battle sequences like *Game of Thrones*, *Wonder Woman*, etc., I limit my scope to US military narratives for the purposes of examining the entertainment industry as it relates to the depiction of contemporary conflicts.

Jane deals with combat when an emergency mission unravels in Libya at the end of the film. Despite being temporarily removed from her duties for false (and homophobic) accusations of fraternizing with women, Moore's character must prove herself by saving the day and the life of her commanding officer, who earlier in the film had subjected her to a tortuous training regiment. "Whether it's a melodrama or a light comedy, a woman's film always forces a woman to make a choice. If she makes the wrong one, she is punished for it. Thus, the woman's film demonstrates society's way of repressing women. Force the choice of tradition on her, and punish her if she chooses anything else."

As the sparsity of these texts illustrate, rarely are women depicted in dramatic television or film in actual combat. When they are, their gender remains the notable element in play. All of these factors are perhaps what makes Showtime's *Homeland* such a complex television series. Her gender and her bipolar disorder consistently mark Carrie's status throughout the series as "other" in relation to her male peers. Saul Berenson takes on a strange paternal role in the series, always playing her superior throughout despite no often times being two steps behind Carrie in their next mission. Whether or not Carrie's most recent hunch is accurate is usually purveyed through Saul's reaction to it, who often pushes and pulls Carrie to and from the CIA depending on how trustworthy he finds her to be in any given season. Additionally, the title, *Homeland*, positions notions of national security alongside the domestic, where "home" can refer to a number of things, ranging from Carrie's own domestic space to the attitudes of the nation at large. *Homeland* also at times reads like a play on the term (and idea of) "motherland," especially when Carrie must juggle her role as the mother of her (and Brody's) daughter, Franny, despite the ever-increasing stress and trauma her work life entails.

Other television scholars have done well to point to out ways in which *Homeland* has adopted traditional crime drama formulas, replacing more typical dealings with

homicides and robberies with terrorism plots. Before *Homeland* even hit the scene, scholar Yvonne Tasker coined the term, “terror TV,” referring to shows like *Law & Order* (1990 - 2010) and *NCIS: Los Angeles* (2009) where “themes of national security and the necessity of combating terror” have been transposed from more action based mediums to more formulaic crime television scenarios. Here, combating terror and the “unpalatable techniques” used in such programs, according to Tasker, are “effectively normalized,” with American audiences getting used to the idea of extreme US intelligence strategies as they are dramatized with exceeding severity every week.⁷³ Fox’s *24* (2001-2010), which was in production before the attacks on September 11th and began airing just two months after, is often considered the centerpiece for this shift where Jack Bauer becomes a TV version of Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* that is reinvigorated weekly to deal with a new and dire counter-terrorism pursuit, taking a spot as consistent and pervasive as the weekly trials in something like *Law and Order*.

By the time *Homeland* arrived in 2011, persistent and convoluted fictional terror plots were nothing new for television. Yet because of its Showtime “quality” connotation, many have imbued the text with what Tasker calls a “symbolic dichotomy between the Bush administration’s *24* and Obama’s *Homeland*,” where *Homeland*’s new narrative complexities, are seen as illustrative of a “profound shift” in television crime dramas and perhaps more significantly, American perceptions of terror.⁷⁴ While I don’t disagree that *Homeland* contains depictions of CIA operations that promote an urgent need for “unpalatable techniques” against deeply dramatized and convoluted understandings of terror, for this project I am more interested in examining the unusual site of the series within television genres, understanding Carrie as something of the female Jack Bauer. Indeed, engaging in “terror TV” and crime drama/ spy thriller formulas, *Homeland* also equally makes use of the home-front genre and utilizes distinctive soap opera “woes,” recalling

Rabinovitz's term to create an interesting combination of the qualities and expectations from *both* "masculine" and "feminine" genre forms. I understand Carrie's role as a female intelligence analyst to be the most defining marker of the show, what everyone else responds to and everything centers around. The following section is a close analysis of the series as it relates to its female lead.

CARRIE AS SUBJECT HEROINE: "IT'S MY JOB. IT WILL ALWAYS BE MY JOB! DON'T YOU GET THAT?!"³



Figure 1: Carrie's crying face.

Throughout its arc, *Homeland* sends Carrie on an array of missions. At the start of the show, she has recently been removed as a station agent in Iraq and effectively grounded in the US after overstepping her duties abroad. Upon her return to the states, she is convinced that a returned POW, Brody (Damian Lewis), is planning an attack on the US with Al Qaeda. She ultimately falls in love with Brody, after watching him through illegal

³ From Episode 9, "Crossfire," where Carrie is catatonic in her bed after being fired from the CIA.

surveillance, despite being right about her suspicions. The first three seasons of the show are then focused on Brody's interactions with his wife and children as he becomes further entangled with Carrie's world and her negotiations with Al Qaeda, working as a double agent and eventually dying in a public hanging in Iran in the season three finale. After Brody's death, *Homeland's* seasonal arcs become much more enclosed, taking on a new location and new problem each year. In season four, Carrie is a station agent in Kabul, despite having recently given birth to Brody's child, Franny. There she is responsible for a drone strike resulting in civilian deaths and must deal with the aftermath of the following insurgency. In season five, she is in Berlin with her daughter in tow. Having tired of her drone days, she now works for a non-profit. However, she is still the center of major geopolitical strife and must ultimately stop a Sarin gas attack from hitting the Berlin subway system. In season six, she is back stateside, this time in Brooklyn, working for an organization that provides resources for Muslim immigrants in the US. By the end of this season, she foils an assassination attempt on the first female president. Season seven, (recently concluded at the time of this writing) finds Carrie back in D.C. where she is unemployed and living with her sister. Her obsessive suspicions about the president's authoritative actions cause her sister to sue for custody of her daughter. The loss of Franny allows Carrie back into the hands of Saul and the CIA once again in order to unearth a Russian plan to disrupt the US government. Carrie's finds herself in the middle of every major geopolitical crisis every season, no matter where she is stationed. Her bipolar disorder is often depicted as having both facilitating her peculiar genius for solving complex plots and continually debilitating her capacity to act, where her manic-ness sometimes works in her favor while other times works against her. Thus, her mental stability, wrapped up in her ability to assess and prevent terrorism, alongside her role as a mother – is constantly in flux throughout the show.

The first three seasons of *Homeland* now appear to be almost a substantially different show from the one airing in subsequent seasons because it was so deeply entrenched within Carrie and Brody's tumultuous relationship. It used the story of a returned POW as a foundational tool in which to ponder questions of nationhood and ultimately familial loyalty, both in many ways being defined by the other at once as the nation state is represented and negotiated through the individual family unit. In season one, Brody's return, after being held captive in Iraq for eight years, is immediately questioned by Carrie, who suspects he has been "turned" by his captor – the terrorist mastermind and main "villain" Abu Nassir - and she sets up surveillance without clearance from the CIA within the Brody home to keep an eye on him without clearance from the CIA.

Much of the first half of the season depicts Carrie watching screens set up on her living room coffee table that display the interiority of the Brody family's lives. We watch as she watches awkward breakfasts and dinners, as Brody struggles with PTSD, as his wife Jessica attempts to hide an affair, as his daughter questions his behavior, etc. It is specifically not your typical surveillance scenario as it doesn't necessarily invoke big government or allusions to the Panopticon since Carrie is very much not sanctioned by the state. Instead her female status and hidden bipolar disorder are often played out as inherently counter to the CIA's methods, constantly undermining their system to follow through with any kind of hunch she may have by whatever means of rationalization she may come by. Any evidence she compiles is never guaranteed to strike any interest or sense of urgency with her superiors. Therefore, the Brody's are being watched not by Big Brother but a rogue underground operation marked by mental illness within the female body. *Homeland's* first season centers on the disruption this force causes as it infiltrates the family home.

The opening credits of *Homeland* features a black-and-white montage of its leading lady as a young girl. Images like the back of a pair of blonde pig tails gazing up at a television screen, another of a girl practicing the trumpet in conjunction with Louis Armstrong, a lone masked figure in the middle of a maze, an actual photo of a young Claire Danes dressed in a pea-coat, already sporting that wide-eyed stare. The jazz-infused montage of images is really the only moment in the show that references actual events in American history, as Carrie's closed and flickering eyes flash against images of George Bush Sr., Bill Clinton, and a strangely upside-down Barack Obama. Amongst the presidents are iconic images of 9/11 – smoke billowing out of the Financial District, views from the Queens Expressway, news excerpts, etc. – all of which work to create a kind of tunnel vision in terms of Carrie's state of mind, denoting a non-linear, non-logical way of viewing histories. This distinct vantage point also plays out within her bipolar disorder. This unique perspective is solidified with an audio bit of a conversation between her and Saul, where Carrie attempts to explain her often times obsessive paranoia:

Carrie: I missed something once before. I won't – I can't let that happen again!

Saul: That was ten years ago. Everyone missed something that day.

Carrie: "Yeah well everyone's not me."

Referring directly to 9/11, *Homeland* over and over again in its first season reminds us that Carrie is different from other intelligence workers in the field, that her responsibilities lie in a realm above those of her peers. She's been thinking about these things since her girlhood. Scholar Alex Bevan writes that the "mental and bodily health of Carrie Mathison become battlegrounds for the series' overarching questions about state surveillance and citizenship," and goes on to propose that "rather than thinking of gender in *Homeland* as performance or lived experience, we might think of it as diagramming the integrities and ruptures in geopolitical selfhood and statehood."⁷⁵ Carrie tells us she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age 22-- as if, instead of considering motherhood as some women begin

to do, her mental illness disrupts this “natural instinct” and redirects its protective qualities over the nation itself.



Figure 2: Anne Hathaway as Carrie on *SNL* in 2012, mimicking Claire’s much discussed crying face paired with her penchant for wine and pills.

Following Bevan, I understand the severity of Carrie Mathison’s gendered role within the series as illustrative of the ways current quality shows have worked to “understand” war, where *Homeland* funnels so much onto its female protagonist that Carrie Mathison takes on elements of the abject. To refer to Kristeva in her groundwork essay, “The Powers of Horror,” the abject can be defined as:

A certain “ego” that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out.⁷⁶

Many reviews and parodies of *Homeland* are quick to call attention to Carrie Mathison's cumbersome bottom lip and altogether exaggerated crying face. Beyond the physical, somewhat more obvious elements of horror embedded in her very facial expressions, I think it is useful to consider the multitude of extraneous, state sanctioned and otherwise, atrocities that happen unto Carrie and her unwavering willingness to return to her sacred "job."

Perhaps the inexplicable aspect of season one is that fact that Carrie instinctively *knows* from the very first episode that Brody harbors extremely violent intentions against the country yet she still falls in love with him. In addition to that emotional leap, Carrie also witnesses through her surveillance what can only be described as a rape scene in episode 1 when Brody aggressively throws his wife's down on the bed and violently has sex with her despite obvious expressions of pain and confusion. It's extremely difficult to watch, and even more startling to see it unacknowledged later in the show, both by the wife and by Carrie. It's understood not as a rape but as a returned POW struggling to be intimate again. When Carrie and Brody do have sex for the first time, drunkenly in a car, it is similarly violent and yet Carrie is put in direct contrast with Brody's wife in her enjoyment of it. Later, when the pair escape to a cabin in season two, she is being surveyed by her colleagues, Saul and Quinn, who argue over Carrie's ability to remain objective – an argument accompanied by the audio of her climaxing reverberating throughout the control room. "No tell me really, I'd like your expert opinion," angrily demands Quinn. "Is that someone turning something around or is that a stage five delusional getting laid?" Carrie's pleasure here is made monstrous, as both her and Brody's intentions become increasingly unclear, their coupling blurring national allegiance and transgressing familial bonds.

In addition to often having her sex life surveyed, Carrie's integrity and sense of sanity are routinely undermined or manipulated by people around her. In the first season,

Brody sells Carrie down the river, telling the CIA about their relationship and her continued “harassment” of him. He silences her with the inevitable charge of hysteria as she fails to convince Saul and others about Brody’s connection to Abu-Nassir. Brody is believed and Carrie is fired. When she asks Saul, “Why would he do that?” later in her pajamas in the fetal position in her bedroom, Saul must console her like a father would a daughter in the midst of heartbreak; she is utterly reduced amid her quiet sniffing.

During the season one finale, in a last-ditch effort to get Brody’s daughter to talk Brody out of going through with Nassir’s attack, Carrie goes to their home in the flesh after surveilling it for months. The daughter calls the cops on her, unable to believe that her father could be a terrorist, and it’s as though Carrie has finally crossed enemy lines. She is then dragged across the front lawn in handcuffs as Brody’s wife and daughter look on. Unlike other women in combat genres, she is neither welcomed on the field nor in the home. It’s Carrie’s lowest, most frantic self after going to the last place she thought people might accept her musings, only to find the Brody family are the least aware of Brody’s intentions. “She’s sick!” the wife exclaims. Her failure to be accepted into any kind of space, whether domestic or otherwise, further emphasizes Carrie as an abject figure, unable to convince anyone of her theories. “It’s crazy what you did,” Brody later tells her at the police station, as her bottom lip quivers. At this point she is finally surrenders to the insanity accusations and checks herself into a psych ward. She cages her own intuition and volunteers for electroshock therapy. To harken back to Basinger’s analysis of *So Proudly We Hail*, “She is in the catatonic state of the movie-story woman who tried to be a man, but found she was a woman after all (229).” Even though the audience knows Carrie is right about Brody – he had planned to detonate a suicide vest - we still must partake in watching her demise.

And yet, despite her epic falls, Carrie continues to rise up again. As if invoking Sylvia Plath, *Homeland* reincarnates Carrie almost every season. Like the figure of Lady Lazarus (“And I a smiling woman. / I am only thirty. / And like the cat I have nine times to die.”),⁷⁷ Carrie rises from the dead over and over again as though nothing had ever occurred, as the everyone in her life ostracized her to the point of psychiatric treatment. After her first hospitalization, despite being distrusted and maligned and despite recently surviving a bombing (which she will go on to do countless times in the series) she is able to offer console to Saul, who doesn’t like seeing her in the hospital: “You didn’t do anything, Saul. I just came this way.” After years in the CIA, many of which stationed in Iraq, and being fiercely questioned along the way, Carrie is quick to relieve him of any guilt he may have over her emotional state. The cause of her trauma then is almost always rerouted back to her bipolar disorder, absolving the CIA, Brody, and everyone else of any responsibility toward her physical and mental state.

The discomfort and disorder she puts her mind and body through ultimately labor toward clearing Brody’s name after the CIA headquarters is bombed. Like Saul, she has forgiven Brody in season two for no real explicable reason other than her own failure of “falling in love.” Despite her efforts in the second and third seasons, where she is again hospitalized, again bombed, and again furiously questioned along the way, changing leadership in the CIA fails to keep Brody alive after getting captured in Iran following a successful assassination mission. The Iranian asset that maneuvered the capture tells Carrie, “You’ve done what you set out to do. Which was for everyone to see in him what you see. That has happened. Everyone sees him through your eyes now.” Carrie’s love for Brody and enduring trauma culminates in his return to American patriot status. Again, she quickly forgives and forgets what should be a tragic setback. The scene in which we first see her back from Tehran after Brody’s death is startlingly void of any backlash on her

part. Despite recently having watched her supposed soul mate die in a public hanging, she acts like a recently hired employee when she walks into the new CIA chief's office where she's offered the role of station chief in Istanbul. Even though she is in her third trimester with Brody's baby, she remains in her black pantsuit, her bump hidden in her office drab look as though it might as well not even be there. No conversation occurs around the obvious elephant in the room – the father of the baby was publicly executed in Iran – nor does any question of maternity leave factor into the new position. As if a reset button was switched, Carrie continues onward like a cyborg. The following season she is reincarnated ominously as the “drone queen,” leaving her baby in the care of her sister. In a 2017 interview on *Ellen*, when asked what direction she'd like to see her character go in, Claire Danes answered with, “a little relief,” later going on to say she'd like to see Carrie play a game of monopoly with her daughter “just one time, some domestic bliss. I think she earned that. You could give that to her.”

CONCLUSION

The broad range and urgency of the US foreign and domestic conflicts get channeled through the intensification of Carrie's abjectness in her status as a female intelligence analyst. While its categorization of “quality” suggest its interested in depicting complex, unexplored narratives, *Homeland* offers little beyond the gender boundaries already at play in other war media. By throwing Carrie into the equation, as if to confront Susan Jeffords' claim head on that all war narratives work to exclude women, *Homeland* has only magnified the ways in which women and the “feminine” do not belong in the high-stakes scenarios of geopolitical strife, underlining the impossibility of understanding and retelling conflict beyond the scope of gender. *Homeland's* main concern is not the war

on terror nor the changing political climate in the US; instead, its main focus centers on Carrie's role in the center of it all and its inherent misplacement there.

To return to the graffiti artists, *Homeland* is racist, but in the same way that characters on *Mad Men* are racist. It's not that the show doesn't care about Muslims or thinks all Muslims are going to assassinate the vice president, it's that its formula doesn't allow for anything else beyond the melodramatic and the hyperbolic. Carrie's reality only exists if characters like Abu Nassir do too, where both figures take on the position of the abject in their banishment and their insistence on returning again and again. I do not say this as an apology for the show, but rather to understand why such characters and narratives operate. *Homeland's* combination of melodrama and counter-terrorism, it seems, does not work to better represent the world but rather, works to view it in its most legible terms, where Carrie is a woman in a man's world and her job is to fight bad guys. It only provides answers to our current geopolitical moment if you believe this construct is a meaningful one.

⁶⁷ Durkey, Laura. "Homeland' is the most bigoted show on television." *The Washington Post*. October 24, 2014.

⁶⁸ Tanabe, Karin. "The Obamas' Facebook rules, TV habits." *Politico*. December 14, 2011.

⁶⁹ "Damian Lewis Signed Obama's 'Homeland' DVD Set With A Muslim Joke (VIDEO)," *Huffington Post*, November 12, 2012, sec. TV & Film, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/12/damian-lewis-obama-homeland-dvd-muslim-joke_n_2118351.html.

⁷⁰ Brian T. Edwards, "Moving Target: Is 'Homeland' Still Racist?," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, accessed May 4, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/moving-target-is-homeland-still-racist/>.

⁷¹ James Castonguay, "Fictions of Terror: Complexity, Complicity and Insecurity in *Homeland*," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 4 (July 22, 2015): 139–45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2015.0045>.

⁷² Basinger and Arnold, *The World War II Combat Film*.

⁷³ Yvonne Tasker, "Television Crime Drama and Homeland Security: From 'Law & Order' to 'Terror TV,'" *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (2012): 44–65.

⁷⁴ Lindsay Steenberg and Yvonne Tasker, "'Pledge Allegiance': Gendered Surveillance, Crime Television, and Homeland," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 4 (July 22, 2015): 132–38.

⁷⁵ Alex Bevan, "The National Body, Women, and Mental Health in Homeland," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 4 (July 22, 2015): 145–51, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2015.0048>.

⁷⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de L'horreur (English)* (Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁷⁷ Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus," in *Collected Poems* (HarperCollins, 1992).

Conclusion: Reproductions of 9/11 and *The Looming Tower*

Throughout this study, I have illustrated the many factors involved in our relationship with contemporary US wars/conflicts as they are depicted on our television screens. I have positioned genre and gender as centerpieces from which we negotiate the reproduction and repackaging of war narratives in order to examine how popularized versions of war reflect our understanding and expectations of television as a medium that both informs and entertains. I find this study significant not only because war media in general is a rather underdeveloped field, but also because of the effective cross-section television provides as a historically formulaic and gendered medium that frequently intersects with the often-veiled nature of our contemporary military conflicts. Some of the shows discussed in this study, like *Army Wives*, are too often disregarded as inconsequential or unimportant areas of study, while others, like *Homeland*, are considered legitimate forums to examine divisive US foreign policy and political structures. More intervention is needed to address this growing “info-tainment” divide. I have argued that soapy home-front based television can tell us as much about ourselves, if not more, than quality combat-driven television often postulates.

For example, as I was writing this study, Hulu began airing a series focused entirely on the events leading up to the attacks on September 11th. The scripted political drama, *The Looming Tower* (2018), is Hulu’s most recent attempt at original programming following the success of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017). The series, an adaptation of the 2006 Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Lawrence Wright, is made up of ten hour-long episodes that depict the fissures between the CIA and the FBI that ultimately led to the hefty counter-intelligence oversights leading up to 9/11. So, it felt rather serendipitous that while I was

examining post-9/11 television, the first series to focus on the attacks, which have informed the very sentiment and shape of texts examined earlier, would make its debut.

Several popular films have depicted versions of 9/11 in various ways, whether recreating the attacks themselves (*World Trade Center*, 2006 and *United 93*, 2006), or evoking the event in a broader narrative about loss (*Reign Over Me*, 2007 and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2011), or staging them in a political intervention (*Fahrenheit 9/11*, 2004). Hulu's *The Looming Tower* is television's most direct depiction of the event to date. Previously, television series that have depicted or referenced 9/11 have done so in singular "event" episodes. For example, *The West Wing* portrayed a White House lockdown during a fictional terrorist attack shortly after 9/11 while *Law and Order* depicted a murder investigation that was covered up by dumping the victim's remains in Ground Zero. It has been evoked more broadly on television as an emotional backdrop as well, particularly in the 2004 FX series, *Rescue Me*, for example, where an NYC firefighter (played by Dennis Leary) mourns the loss of his best friend who was killed while trying to help get people out.

The attacks have appeared in these minute ways rather consistently on television without much interrogation of their wider political meaning. *The Looming Tower* promises to do just that; its ten episodes lead-up to the day, starting in 1998 amidst the Monica Lewinsky scandal and ending on September 11th. As the title suggests, the event is "looming" as the series progresses, where the figure of John O'Neill (Jeff Daniels), who died in the attacks, is often shown walking to and from a downtown Manhattan apartment with the towers standing ominously in the background.

The series is for all intents and purposes, a "quality" television show, checking off the formal pedigree requirements: a limited series run, based on "true" events (already depicted in an award-winning book by an award-winning author), created by an established

documentary filmmaker (Alex Gibney), and housed on a subscription-based streaming service. Additionally, the narrative itself is a story about big personalities in the CIA and the FBI colliding, featuring (unsurprisingly) difficult, unlikeable men at the helm of this confrontation. In direct opposition is O'Neill, the former head of the New York City FBI division of counter-terrorism, and Martin Schmidt (played by Peter Sarsgaard), the head of the CIA's Al Qaeda unit at the time. O'Neill wants less military intervention in places like Yemen and Saudi Arabia while Schmidt wants more, their spar ultimately leading the CIA to withhold information, some of it relating to the hijackers, who had entered the US over a year before the attack. The series' unsung heroes are Richard Clarke (Michael Stuhlbarg), the National Coordinator for Security, and Ali Soufan (Tahar Rahim), a Lebanese-American FBI agent working under O'Neill, one of eight Arabic speaking agents in the entire bureau at the time of the attacks. The two are portrayed as diligent investigators whose work gets ignored by higher powers. O'Neill's story is arguable the primary emotional arc of the show and indeed, his death is a rather extraordinary one to those unaware of Wright's book. After sparring with both the CIA and his own colleagues within the bureau over their mishandling of Al Qaeda threats, as well as some personal and financial problems, O'Neill was forced to retire from the FBI. He then took a position as the head of security at the World Trade Center just two weeks before the attacks.

Yet Jeff Daniel portrays O'Neill as an arrogant and unpleasant individual, and the series itself is intently focused on depicting the disarray of the man's personal life alongside his increasingly tenuous position at the FBI, where his juggling of extramarital affairs, pervasive tendency to lie, and misuse of FBI funds are posited as coinciding with the bureaucratic, perhaps even moral failings, leading up to the attacks. "In the book, Mr. Wright gives a few pages to Mr. O'Neill's byzantine romantic life, as a counterpoint to Islamist attitudes toward women and sex," notes *The New York Times*. "This gets a fuller,

but (so far) less relevant treatment on screen.”⁷⁸ Indeed, *The Looming Tower* television series is preoccupied with the personal lives of the American men it examines. Martin’s stubbornness is corroborated by his female colleague with whom he has a relationship, and who ultimately takes on the task of withholding information after he is fired. Her character, played by Diane Marsh, is painstakingly icy, where one scene in particular depicts her luxuriously applying lipstick in a mirror as she declines to share vital information with colleagues. Her inexplicable loyalty to Martin makes her one of the show’s more one-dimensionally characters, casting her as a downright villain. On the flipside, Soufan’s relationship with his Muslim identity is framed by his burgeoning love life with a white female elementary school teacher, a vision of white Western virtue.

Given its subject matter, the series spends an arguably inordinate amount of time dwelling on these personal relationships. Using its female characters predominately as cyphers, *The Looming Tower* is preoccupied with both the personal corruption and subtle heroism of its male players. “About 80 percent of Mr. Wright’s text didn’t involve Americans. It was about, and told from the point of view of, Middle Easterners. [*The Looming Tower*] has reduced the story to that other 20 percent” (Hale). Indeed, at its most absurd and telling moment, the series insists briefly on showing the hijackers spending time in Las Vegas strip clubs in the days preceding the attacks.⁷⁹ Despite showcasing features more akin to the documentary form – utilizing a Pulitzer prize-winning source, depicting real attacks like the bombing of the *U.S.S. Cole*, and even employing actual footage of Bin Laden, nonetheless, the series relies on myth to illustrate the timeline of the hijackers. While later investigations revealed the men involved in the attacks spent time in Las Vegas, there is no evidence this time was specifically spent getting private lap dances and taking drugs, as tabloids, intent on revealing some moral hypocrisy, had reported after the attack.⁸⁰ The series’ perpetuation of this myth is telling. When it diverges from

grounded truths and takes creative license, it does so to illustrate an extremely gendered scenario, where the strip club functions to delegitimize the hijacker's hatred against the US. As if to say, "See, they too enjoy the 'western' objectification of women, just like O'Neill, Martin, and Soufan do." Thus, instead of exploring the intentions and hatred behind the attack, *The Looming Tower* relies on tired tropes, using women and women's bodies to illustrate the downfall and disorder of the men in control and at play.

So far, the series has been met with high praise. *GQ* called *The Looming Tower* as a political drama that "actually has something to say."⁸¹ *Vanity Fair* called it "Hulu's second Trump-Era must-watch."⁸² Yet some publications, including *The New York Times*, have been less enthused, expressing frustration with the generic crime formulas the series falls back on. *Slate* writes, "*The Looming Tower* turns a Pulitzer-Winning account of how 9/11 happened into a half-season of CSI."⁸³ *The Looming Tower* is, then, either a new, must-watch take on 9/11 or it's just another cable drama.

Indeed, the changing landscape of serial television provides a complex forum to examine popular conceptions of our ongoing wars and events like 9/11. As Jeanine Basinger's work on war genres has demonstrated, the popular narrative surrounding even the largest of global conflicts will eventually be parsed over and shaped into recognizable formula sets. I hope that this study has illustrated the importance of tracing the landscape around these formulas to better locate, contextualize, and understand them in their inevitable reproductions in the future. As every major US war has seen its events shaped and reshaped through television decades past its end, so too will the conflicts in the Middle East and here at home, as we already seen start to happen. These reproductions have tended towards the self-referential mode and most likely will continue to do so. It is important to acknowledge these reproductions as just that, reproductions, often unmoored to the reality

of the conflicts being restaged but rather, tethered to its previous depictions and pre-existing televisual formulas.

What's perhaps most telling about *The Looming Tower* and its divided reception is the apparent desire of American audiences to learn something new about 9/11. Its investigative aesthetic is admittedly appealing in contrast to our current moment often dictated by the fast-paced Twittersphere of "fake news." The series then feels long-form journalistic reprieve. Whether or not *The Looming Tower* can say actually something new about 9/11, and more broadly, whether or not television can answer our growing concerns about our wars abroad, are questions I will open for further study. More definitively, what the shows described in this study do illustrate is the persistent need to fill gaps of knowledge about our contemporary conflicts too often left open for TV to fill up.

⁷⁸ Michael Cohen, "Homeland Isn't Just Bad TV, It Peddles the Worst Lies about US Foreign Policy | Michael Cohen," *The Guardian*, December 16, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/16/homeland-worst-lies-us-power-foreign-policy>.

⁷⁹ Episode 9, "Tuesday." *The Looming Tower*. 2018.

⁸⁰ Toby Harnden, "Seedy Secrets of Hijackers Who Broke Muslim Laws," *Telegraph*, October 5, 2001, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1358665/Seedy-secrets-of-hijackers-who-broke-Muslim-laws.html>.

⁸¹ Scott Meslow, "'The Looming Tower' Is a Political Drama That Actually Has Something to Say," *GQ*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.gq.com/story/hulu-the-looming-tower-review>.

⁸² Nicole Sperling, "Why 9/11 Drama The Looming Tower Could Be Hulu's Second Trump-Era Must Watch," *Vanity Fair*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/02/looming-tower-hulu-alex-gibney-lawrence-wright>.

⁸³ Joshua Keating, "Hulu's The Looming Tower Is 9/11 Viewed Through the Lens of Law & Order," *Slate Magazine*, February 28, 2018, <https://slate.com/culture/2018/02/hulus-the-looming-tower-reviewed.html>.

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