The American Hero through the Twentieth Century

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The idea of the 'hero' has been a central element of Western culture since its conception in the works of Homer and Herodotus. The historical context is a vivid study, but hardly impacts modern usage of the word. Heroes from the past remain public figures, but interpretations of their status have often changed. The types of people eligible for hero status are different as well. The 'hero,' like most other social constructions, has undergone massive transformations during the twentieth century. America's experiences during that century were markedly different from elsewhere in the world and it understandably affected their heroes. This paper means to examine the American ideal of the hero as it has developed through the twentieth century to the present. It begins with a set of fundamental questions: what is a 'hero,' both in a historical sense and a modern one? Why has the view of the hero changed? Finally, what does that metamorphous say about the people who use the word and point to it?

At this juncture, it is important to note the limitations of this work. The focus will only be on American perceptions and figures. Because the goal of this paper is to give an overview of American relations and reactions to heroes and heroism, the examples used come from popular media. Consequently this paper only addresses major elements and movements of the country. The breadth of the topic requires use of some generalizations. Finally, the term 'hero' is emotion-evoking and everyone has biases concerning their personal interpretation of 'hero.'

It is simple enough to conjure a whole list of heroes readily available in the American public imagination, but trying to describe *why* they are heroic is more complicated. In its formative years, the United States focused on two types of heroes:

the classical and the rogue. The classic hero archetype had dominated Western culture since its formation in Ancient Greece. The basic requirements were self-sacrifice for a greater cause and a journey to accomplish some goal. For ease of recognition, the American version of the classical hero will be called the 'traditional hero' for the remainder of this paper. The rogue, however, is a distinctly American model of hero. The admiration and promotion of the rogue was rather unique to the US. Yes, there was the occasional Robin Hood in Europe, but there were more King Arthurs. In hierarchical societies, rogue behavior was not exactly encouraged or romanticized to the same extent. These two tropes dominated until the Vietnam War, when thoughts on heroes changed drastically. Although the long war was not wholly responsible for the shift, by the end of it the idea of an American 'hero' had undergone a definite transformation.

Recent types of American heroes can be categorized as embodying some combination of the following four archetypes: the antihero, the action hero, the mythic hero, and the social hero. The antihero figure is one placed in a role or position that could have been heroic if the figure were not inherently flawed. The action hero is absolutely brilliant in a war setting, but unable to function in 'normal' society. The mythic hero is beyond believability and is generally presented in a context of archetypes. The final type of hero is the most difficult to describe. The social hero is a product of modern reinterpretations of the past: any group that was considered repressed in the past or was lacking in a public voice is now being integrated into the realm of heroism. Much as feminism disseminated history and rebuilt it to include

women, so the same is happening with the label of 'hero.' Previously, 'heroes,' both the

traditional and the rogue, were a decided combination of the four characteristics.

Realistically, a 'hero' in the classical sense is nonexistent today. The rogue has been

relegated to the fictional realm, with a definite disconnect from reality. The definition

of 'hero' has splintered into three categories previously grouped together and one new

category that has arisen from social redefinitions.

Before the redefining, the traditional hero was definitely military-based, white,

and male. Comparing George Washington and Benjamin Franklin illustrates this point.

Both were instrumental in the founding of the nation and both are still revered, but

Franklin does not have the prestige of Washington. Washington enjoys an undisputed

status of a hero of the nation, while Franklin is merely considered important[1]. The

major difference between the two was Washington's military prowess and victories,

which gave Washington undisputable moral righteousness. Many biographies of him

spend a disproportionate number of pages on his military achievements at the expense

of the rest of his life[2]. Franklin by contrast was only rarely mentioned in any of the

books on American heroes. With the advent of the social hero, however, figures like

Benjamin Franklin are receiving attention in a heroic light. His achievements did not

change, but his legacy is being revised: now he can be a hero of science. Yet even with

1. A comparison of their statues around the country illustrates this difference. Washington has more effigies that were made closer to his lifetime. Statues of Franklin are generally near places important to him or to science, and many were created more recently.
2. Fishwick, *American Heroes: Myth and Reality* and Linenthal, *Changing Images of the Warrior Hero in America* address this issue

the social hero revising the demographics of who can be a hero, the other three types all remain deeply entrenched in violence.

The rogue, the other heroic archetype of early US history, had different qualifications than the traditional hero. He was also white and male, but did not need to be in the military. Violence was still central to his identity, but it did not require the structures or justifications of the military. The rogue archetype was unorthodox or uncanny, but always fought for the greater good. His deviation from the traditional hero did not villainize or victimize him. Instead, his rakishness and audacity made him a 'free man;' all traits decidedly admired by the American public. The intricacies and quirks that led him to reject a 'normal' or 'passive' lifestyle were not encouraged in reality, but nevertheless considered useful. Natty Bumppo, of James Fenimore Cooper's novels, typifies the rogue: he lived outside society yet aided it unquestioningly. He was a 'free man,' which has long been an American ideal, and unrestrained by societal standards. The rogue was not a flawed hero: his quirks were appealing instead of crippling. When the traditional hero shifted, so did the rogue. This trope was relegated to the antihero. No longer were his individualistic ways estimable or desired. Individuals in reality, who formerly would have been 'rogues,' are now considered closer to antiheroes.

The antihero needs the heroic situation in order to prove his unworthiness. In such a situation, his vices and fallibilities become apparent. Those flaws set him apart from the hero.

The recent humanization of heroes has guaranteed that all of the established ones have acquired at least some antiheroic qualities. General George Custer, once widely admired for his presumed martyrdom, is now at best portrayed as a romantic incompetent who was unable to follow orders due to his glory-seeking. His involvement in the Indian Wars, now a hallmark of American bigotry, further compounds his change from hero to antihero[3]. Even though Custer acted in accordance with the expectations of his time, modern revisions have placed self-preservation, indigenous resistance, and racial equality above last stands and conquering. Instead of a hero of westward expansion, Custer is a bigot and fool because his morals are now considered wrong; thus he is inherently flawed.

The action hero is so entrenched in a dangerous lifestyle that he is unable to leave it. His skills, mentality, and flaws are so attuned to an extreme way of living that he is simply unable to return to normal society. John Rambo, the outstanding example of this type, is deeply flawed. His flaws are not inherent. Instead, they are the result of his government or the way he has been used, but he is absolutely brilliant when it comes to fighting. When he is defeating enemies, he is loved as a hero, but his return to society is dreaded as it is assumed that he will be unable to reintegrate. Thus, he is considered a hero when away, but is not necessarily welcomed back.

The final type of hero is the mythic. This hero is fictional. He is the most prevalent type and the closest to the more classical definition of a hero. Legendary heroes now fall under this category. All types of media outlets have spawned fictional

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3. Linenthal, *Changing Images of the Warrior Hero in America*, pages 19-30

heroes: literature, comic books, television, radio, and the internet have all contributed popular heroes to society. The basis of the mythic hero is either the inability to believe literally in the person or the situation. Heracles' superhuman strength is just that, superhuman; and so he makes an excellent story, but not someone who could exist in reality. Batman, though a human with no super powers, is also a mythic hero because his whole situation is beyond the possibilities of reality.

Some generalizations about American heroes are already observable. In keeping with the rest of the Western historical tradition, the hero is white and male. This bias is based on the three key factors: the necessity of violence, the reliance of the military establishment on men, and the enemy as an 'other' that was often ethnically different. Of those three, the prejudice against other races was the first to be lessened. The reliance on men for the military and the long standing belief that women are inherently less violent are still deeply entrenched in the US paradigm of gender-relationships and its concepts of heroism.

This gender-bias is still evident. Even though the military is about 20% female overall[4], they are restricted from combat situations. The reasoning varies from inability to uncontrollable rage, but the fact remains that women are considered lesser warriors[5]. Since the militarily-based type of heroism is consequently off-limits to women, their heroism has to come through in other forms. Often, in 'real life,' a female can perform a

4. Population Representation in the Military Services Report 2010, specifically D-16 and figure 15 in the Summary Report
5. Books on this subject include Co-Ed Combat: The New Evidence that Women Shouldn't Fight the Nation's Wars by Kingley Browne, Women in the Military: Flirting with Disaster by Brian Mitchell, and Women in Combat: Civic Duty or Military Liability? by Lorry Fenner and Marie deYoung.

heroic deed, like running into a burning building to rescue the occupants, but very few females outside the fantasy realm are considered heroes.

Consider that distinction for a moment. Anyone can perform heroically in a given situation, but does that make them more than a momentary hero? For the sake of this paper, no: a hero must consistently act like one. Yet, if a soldier who is awarded the Medal of Honor never performs another heroic act, he can still be considered a *war hero*. The relationship between the awarding of the Medal of Honor and automatic hero status is another issue that will be discussed later. This paper is about the subtle nuances of labeling rhetoric types, as there is no longer a single definition that works for every hero. 'Hero' has become a too multifaceted and arguably overused word to be easily contained in a succinct definition anymore.

Another aspect of the shift in heroic definition is now apparent. Historically, the traditional hero and the rogue were determined by their actions. Modern heroes, however, are examined as a whole. Exploits were the only requirements for the archaic tropes: they could be abrasive, or uncommunicative, or misogynistic, but none of that mattered in the face of their accomplishments. Today, a person has to be virtuous, moral, and likeable as well as performing heroically. In order to keep their hero status, they have to be a 'complete hero'. That term will denote the idea of a hero who fulfills all societal expectations.

Achilles is a good illustration of the definition divide. Classically, he was a *hero*, and very little explanation was needed to prove that fact. Today though, his actions do not override him as a whole. He has elements of the antihero, the action hero, and the

mythic hero. His fatal flaw, his heel, has actually been adapted as a term that means 'fatal flaw.' His rage, pride, and impulsiveness ensured more mutual destruction. So yes, he was excellent, but flawed. As Carl Rubino succinctly puts it, "Achilles is well-aware that once the war is over, he will never fit into the established social order…Achilles is out of place in society; the very qualities that make him indispensable also make it impossible for him to submit to the constraints of society or for society to tolerate him."[6] That quote is, in fact, a near perfect description of the archetypal action hero. Today, however, Achilles is no longer merely a hero. He has become a complex man whose complex emotions require attention too. In some ways he was a hero, but in others, he was a troubled warrior who had issues, like rage, womanizing, and impatience.

The antihero, as a direct descendent from the rogue, is distinctly American. Other cultures have flawed heroes, but the importance and prominence of the antihero is obvious in the American mystique. There are two types of antihero: both are flawed but one overcomes his flaws and the other manages to work with his flaws. That tired trope that 'no one is perfect' ensures that all real heroes have at least some flaws, making them antiheroes to varying degrees. (A hero without flaws would fall under the mythic heading.) The importance of flaws has become a major part of the heroic culture today.

There are minor and major flaws in everyone. Minor ones have more to do with uniqueness than major flaws, which greatly impact a person's relations and life. There

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6. Rubino, "Obsolescence of the Hero," page 87

are physical, psychological, moral, and character flaws. The physical ones are to be invariably and triumphantly overcome: if it is something like a hereditary trait or a deformity, then one learns to work around it. If it was an injury that caused the imperfection, then both the physical nature of the wound and the lasting mental trauma from it need to be overcome. The psychological flaws are rather like the physical ones. Whether it is a fear, a memory, or a dependence, it is expected that the hero will overcome it one way or another. Some flaws, like an addiction, are both mental and physical, but fixable. Moral flaws can also be overcome, or at least momentarily ignored to allow the antihero his heroic moment. Finally, there are the character flaws. This type of flaw is so ingrained that a person needs them. A character flaw is such a fundament part of his identity that the antihero loses himself without it. So the antihero is left with two options concerning this type of flaw: he can either become someone else for better or worse, or hold onto his flaw and remain a broken or insane.

The challenging of flaws is a major part of the antihero archetype. Indeed, they make the antihero a redeemable character instead of a completely contemptible one. Some questions now arise about these interactions: Is it more heroic to have overcome one's flaws? What does 'overcoming' mean? Is it permanently fixing the flaw or just working around it or learning to live with it? The answers to these questions formulate many hero stories. The quest for redemption is an archetype that permeates Western culture. How that redemption occurs and is subsequently handled is the basis of those stories. In modern culture, an antihero is still an antihero even if he completes his redemption quest. His level of heroism is affected though.

The antihero grew from the earlier rogue. Just as the traditional hero has become too fictional for modern day users of the word 'hero,' so has the rogue been relegated to the past. Partially, the exploits of the rogue were too like the traditional hero's—heroes were people and people have flaws. Yet even with that explanation, the disappearance of the rogue in 'real life' is not fully explained.

The last public maverick to remain in a really positive light was General George Patton. His gruff bluntness, old-fashioned desires for combat, and rough edges made him a difficult public figure. During World War II, when his successes were brilliant, those personality traits were lauded or ignored. It took the Vietnam War for him to be reevaluated with a new rubric that disallowed his harsher elements[7]. Instead of being a rogue with an army, to some he became a borderline-madman with anger issues. Although the newer interpretation is less flattering, Patton's genius at war is undeniable. That, coupled with 'golden-era' glow around the Second World War ensures that Patton's current image is still rather positive and heroic.

Even though Patton was successful, the US has worked hard to ensure there are no more rogues. War, at least defined by public American tactics, is about cohesive elements working together as units. Rogue fighters are heavily discouraged within the military and the idea of the solo fighter is rather absurd. This tension appears in the recent film *The Hurt Locker*. The main character embodies maverick sensibilities that concern his unit as it increases the danger for everyone. Certainly, special operational

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7. *Patton,* directed by Franklin J. Schaffner (1970; Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2006) DVD.

forces utilize the individual fighter, but anonymity is a major part of their career. They cannot be public rogues because it would compromise their rogue justification, which is their anonymity in the field. In other branches of the military, the rigid hierarchy works against too much individualism. Why? Perhaps the country is concerned about allowing the military too much unconditional support or perhaps no one is willing to take the risks necessary to rise to idol status like Patton. Both of those issues stem from the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War reinforced the precedent of spreading the blame around: no one was at fault. That safety blanket has remained embedded in military thinking and so it is not surprising that no one has worked to dispel it. Eternal glory seems almost impossible in the modern, often cynical, interpretation of war. Eternal contemptuousness or pity seem more likely outcomes.

Outside the military, the rogue has suffered for other reasons. As a mythic figure, he is enjoyable, but society would prefer he stays fictional. 'Fitting into society' is a subtle, but incredibly strong imperative. In many ways, society has expanded what it deems acceptable so more people are able to 'fit in'. People on the periphery of society are still treated harshly. Thus, people who approve of violent force or exercise it are often condemned. Denunciation of violence is at least part of the reason why the rogue, who invariably used force of some kind, has been neglected in modern times.

The action hero inspires a mixed range of emotions: jealously, fear, and pride. This type of hero is so effective at operating within a violent setting that it seems to be the only place he can he function at all. The thought of him returning to society is

always laced with concern that he will unleash havoc. Soldiers with PTSD often elicit this type of fear. The mythic clear-cut morality of the war zone is inapplicable to the civilian world and it is expected that he will either lose control or deal out a vigilante-style justice. In the first case, he targets everyone. In the second, he only targets people he thinks deserve it. While the second type produces exciting and moral tales in the movies, in reality it becomes rather terrifying and less glamorous. At the same time, there is a sort of pride that such a human has been shaped. Whether through training or lifestyle, it is a remarkable achievement to have made someone so incredibly proficient. (In mythic cases, this type of hero is actually created, in a test tube or by some higher power. Wolverine, of the *X-Men* comics is one such character.) Definite pride exists about creating that sort of power, but that pride turns to fear when he then kills all the scientists in the lab or worshippers. Finally, the action hero is a source of jealousy. It is impressive that he is skilled and difficult to stop. He also has many adventures (hence his title of action hero) and there has always been a certain romance surrounding the idea of adventure.

The final element that makes the action hero so attractive is that he is hypermasculine. He returns to some of the fundamentals of 'traditional manhood': dominating tendencies, physical prowess, independence, bravery, and constantly exhibiting aggression[*]. As such, he often participates in the triumvirate of manliness: sex (without much attachment), killing (without much attachment), and domination in

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[*] Although females are definitely rare in this category, they too follow those requirements. In the film *GI Jane* the main character only becomes a success by adopting distinctly male attitudes and behaviors, even going so far as to shave her head—a very masculine hairstyle.

general. All of the traits listed have been requirements or aids for heroism. In today's shifting perceptions, this type of hero is relegated to the fringe of society, where it is hoped he will stay. In the past, this was the type of hero that single-handedly went on a suicidal mission, managed to complete it, and then faded into the mists. *The Searchers* and *Shane* feature protagonists who follow this plot exactly, leaving at the closing to uncertain ends. Sometimes those mists were death, or the jungle, but always far away from 'normal' society. There has recently been an increase of women in this category, though seemingly only in the fictional realm. Where they differ is their impermanence in this role. They are usually thrust into it by extreme circumstances, finish what they need to, and then are able to return their previous place in life with little friction. Even while immersed in the action hero role, they are either masculinized to the point of androgyny or have to deal with sexist expectations and stereotypes. *GI Jane* illustrates the female action hero. Chosen for her feminine features and expected to fail Navy SEAL training, 'Jane' only succeeds by becoming one of the men. She trains until she is physically equal, has to prove herself tougher under extreme measures, and even goes so far as to shave her head. Given the traditional role of hair as an indicator of femininity, the sacrifice of it is an obvious rejection of femaleness and a move into androgyny.

This type of hero developed out of the Vietnam War period. Victimization became a hallmark of American society and the action hero inherited it. Rambo's first movie presented and solidified this type of hero in the public experience. A disengaged and wandering veteran, he proves himself highly skilled when threatened. Even

though Rambo had returned Stateside, he was still lost in the jungle, as evidenced by his sobbing tirade at the end of the film. His abilities were incredibly useful in the war setting, but disenfranchised him in 'normal' society. Even the honor that had traditionally surrounded martial skills was withheld from Rambo. This message of the veteran not belonging, despite being so talented, was finally shown to the public in a manner they could accept. It was not Rambo's fault that he was essentially a killing machine. It was the government, or the war, or how he was treated afterward. Excuses perhaps, but it is difficult to question designated victims without discrediting oneself. Thanks to Rambo, the Vietnam veteran could be a victim but still retain his skills and honor. All veterans might still be broken, but now that breakage did not have to be pathetic or debilitating[8].

In reality, the issue of readjustment interacts with the action hero stereotype. For soldiers, especially those in elite forces, there is a desire while in field to become like this type of hero. It is significantly easier in war to fully submerge when there are fewer attachments with what had been home. Parents, siblings, significant others, and friends back home are often mentally pushed aside or tucked away. There are two motivations for such a philosophy: to develop into the best soldier possible, and to ensure that one stays focused on the work at hand instead of worrying about others far away. Friends in the military are kept close, but they have a different foundation for their relationship. Survival requires complete focus. In a combat unit, everyone is directly responsible for

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8. Muse, "From Lt. Calley to John Rambo"; Studlar and Desser, "Never Having to Say You're Sorry"

keeping the others alive and as well as possible. That life-bond is very different from a neighborhood friend or a work colleague. So of course, when soldiers who have distanced themselves from home return home, there is expected friction. Likewise, the mentality of war, with its constant threats of death or injury, makes civilian life seem alien. At that point, the veteran has a choice. He can repress his war instincts and settle into civilian life, or he can return to a violent setting and put his skills to use. Both are in a sense a sacrifice, which reinforces both the heroic and the victimized sentiments. There is a possible balance, but it is harder to achieve for both veterans and their close contacts. It is rarely discussed as an option, and instead the extreme ends garner most of the attention.

So the requirements for the action hero are a massive list of skills and instincts that work fantastically in a violent setting but are often detrimental to life in a civilian setting. He is often an extreme personification of fears concerning real, returning soldiers. The belief that the action hero is unable to function in society is propagated by some institutions and believed by the society and the hero. He does not have to be a sympathetic character, but his skills make him invaluable and expendable, depending on the situation. The action hero is often grouped closely with the antihero, but the antihero does not need to be nearly as extreme. Both archetypes have flaws, but the action hero's flaws are invariably deadly and isolating.

By way of example, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *First Blood* premiered within a year of each other. Both featured heroic, male, white leads that were trained to handle extreme, potentially fatal situations. Indiana Jones seemed to have two alter-egos: one

that allowed him a place in society as a mild-mannered archeology professor and one as

an adventurer. Rambo was peaceful enough until someone forced him to the breaking

point and he snapped. Jones is on a quest. Rambo is out for vengeance. At the end,

both have accomplished their goals, but Jones gets to return to his home and his

teaching position, while Rambo is arrested[9].

There are some major points of comparisons for these two films. While Jones

fights against the theatrical evil of the twentieth century, Rambo fights against

corruption within the United States. Although the sequel Rambo films would occur in

foreign countries, the first one took place in Washington, against a domestic force that

was decidedly inferior to Rambo.* *Raiders* is set in the 1930s while *First Blood* was a

modern piece. Jones got to fight against an 'other,' Rambo against an inner evil. Jones

was never considered broken or mentally unstable, despite the dangerous tasks he

undertook. Rambo was definitely damaged. Both had fantasy elements, but Rambo's

were rooted closer to reality.

Both films showed a different side of what the American public was feeling

towards heroes in the early eighties. Both were manly, but one was also 'nerdy.' The

other was hypermasculine. In the face of the gender redefinitions that were gaining

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9. *First Blood*, directed by Ted Kotcheff (1982; Santa Monica, California: Lions Gate, 2004) DVD,
and *Raiders of the Lost Ark,* Directed by Steven Spielberg (1981; Hollywood: Paramount, 2008)
DVD.

* Inequality of strength promoted victimization as well. The Two World Wars were seen as
  equal contests: numbers, tactics, and technology were all near enough that it could be
  considered a fair enough fight. The Vietnam War was strangely unequal: the US possessed
  more resources and technology, but was not ready to use them. The NVA and VC had
  decidedly more motivation, more people willing to fight, and better tactics for the war. So
  both sides were simultaneously superior and inferior, adding to the general haze of
  confusion for the entire war.

credence, each showed an aspect of masculinity. Jones was more classically masculine,

acceptable given that his story occurred in the 1930s. Rambo had swung to an extreme

that directly challenged the new softer type of man, until his tearful tirade at the end.

His outburst did not soften his image, for it played on the intense emotions of war,

which allowed for actions otherwise considered feminine or homoerotic[10]. Jones was

able to embody more of the classical hero: his phobia of snakes was present but he

overcame it without much trouble, he was excellent at what he did (both at home and in

the field), and he completed his quests successfully. He fits nicely into the mythic hero

trope. His flaws are endearing instead of debilitating. He is not an outcast of society.

He was not a repressed minority. Given the prejudices of the eighties, Rambo is broken

because of his veteran status. He is unable to return to society because he became so

accomplished at war. Rambo is, more so than any other figure, the contemporary

Achilles.

The mythic hero encompasses the largest number of all heroes. The major issue

facing the mythic hero is that while their hero status is indisputable, their validity is

questioned because they are not real. Superman is the perfect mythic hero; he is

incredibly strong, has powers like x-ray vision and laser eyes, and is invincible.

Although he has nothing to lose or gain by becoming a superhero, he willingly takes on

that mantle and fights for the greater good. There is really nothing about him that

works against his hero status, except for the fact that he is fictional. There is not even a

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10. Gerzon, *A Choice of Heroes*, page 54

possibility that he could be real. That lack of believability is the very foundation of the

mythic hero: either the person or the situation is too fantastical. Of course, that makes

the mythic hero the most creative and arguably fun type of hero. For example, in the

1950s when heroes in general were more homogenous, Superman existed too. What is

interesting is that although most heroes of the time were war-related (and that meant

they dealt out death), Superman was very careful to not kill his opponents. He was one

of the first nationally-recognized heroes that was not based on death. Yes, his actions

were still violent, but his aversion to killing arguably made him more heroic. His

restraint, because he could kill so easily, actually added to his heroism. Other

superheroes of the period had adopted the no-kill policy as well. It is only with the

social hero of recent decades that the idea of heroic restraint or nonviolence has really

come into its own.

Legends like folk heroes, the heroes in epics, and even archaic religions have

been relegated to the mythic hero. John Henry is an excellent example of the American

folk hero. He accomplished something amazing, died in the doing, and affirmed

fundamental American beliefs. He was an ordinary man, called upon to do something

extraordinary, and did by his own strength. Natty Bumppo too deserves attention as a

uniquely American fictional hero, but he is in some ways more rogue than traditional.

His friendly interactions with the Natives went against the remembered racial divisions,

but some elements of superiority remain present. In each story, his main mission

becomes helping ignorant whites who stumble into trouble. So although he defies

living in civilization (especially expressed in *The Pioneers*), he still aids its advance into

'Indian territory.' His lifestyle is roguish, but his intentions are unfailing for the greater good of white Americans anyways. Unlike John Henry, who was ordinary and asked to momentarily do something extraordinary, Bumppo was socially apart and occasionally asked to rejoin society.

Mister Rogers was involved with another type of legend: the urban legend. There were rumors circulating on the internet about ten years ago that claimed Mister Rogers was more than the beloved, syndicated television host. Why did he wear long sleeves all the time? To cover his tattoos that he had received during his time as a Navy SEAL in the Vietnam War. Untrue, yes, but it made for an engaging story. Mister Rogers was in actuality a minister his entire life[11], but the urban legend elevated him to military hero status momentarily. His comforting and teaching of children for decades was inadequate for heroism, but when it was believed that he had been an elite warrior and had then returned, normalized, and could be such a public figure, he became a sort of poster image for the new generation going to war. These rumors spread around the time as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The urban legend does not have to create the mythic hero in the unbelievable sense, but it often creates fictional heroes or promotes incorrect facts that change a person's status to hero. With the social hero, Mister Rogers has once again been promoted to heroic status, but this time as a positive and impactful TV personality and caretaker.

The 1930s saw a proliferation of new, distinctly American heroes. In particular, the hardboiled hero novel and the superhero of the comic prints were established as

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11. Heffley, "Can You Say, 'Icon'?"

fictional tropes in this decade. For Americans, the 1930s were a painful culmination of the last twenty years. The trauma of the Great War was limited to a few veterans and Europe, and mostly ignored by rest of the country. Instead attention turned to capitalistic gains and the glitz of the wealthy. When those ambitions were violently ended by the Stock Market Crash of 1929, the country found itself having to remake the social order. The fantastical worlds of the hardboiled and superhero were easy escapes.

The hardboiled style played with the lower rings of society and utilized a blunt portrayal of mildly taboo subjects. He was the rogue without the frontier. Instead of being able to leave society behind by heading into the wilderness, he moved down to the mythically dark back alleys and street corners. The disregard of social values and (occasionally) the law was an echo of the lawless lifestyle of the earlier rogue. The hardboiled detective was free from normal expectations, yet he invariably aided the greater good; he was the contemporary iteration of the rogue. In a country where profession determined identity and so many men were out of work, the hypermasculine attitude of the hardboiled was blatantly appealing. Perhaps less obvious, the hardboiled trope made survival a heroic undertaking[12]. Life was suffering, but the will to continue was an element that was especially appealing in the 1930s. Mere survival was not the *only* heroic element of this rogue; his heroism drew from his actions as well.

The superhero is another trope began in the thirties. Super-powered heroes had existed in some form since the advent of literature. Heracles and Achilles were super-powered heroes, but they lacked the three fundamental requirements of the American

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12. Widmer, "The Way Out"

superhero. Those three factors are super-human qualities, adherence to the status quo, and a self-imposed moral code. The super-human requirement does not need to be physical attributes; Batman is a 'normal' human, but his obsessive devotion to crime fighting and limitless wealth make him unrealistic. The fact that superheroes never attempt to change society is the first major deviation from traditional super-humans. Although their powers and skills would allow for an easy overthrow of the government, no superhero even goes as far as reforming education or the justice system. Instead, they target threats that would disrupt the status quo: robbers and world-dominators are the two most common targets. The third factor, the no-kill policy, is another way to maintain the current state of affairs. Fighting the same villain numerous times ensures that superheroes will always have an opponent and that the world remains under threat.

Superheroes, even their modern iterations, are echoes of the traditional or rogue tropes. Their status is based on action: by defeating the plainly evil villains they are clearly heroes. The limited scope of the mediums superheroes are writing in works against including them in the modern revisions of heroes. Superheroes, despite the heavy emphasis on their dual identity, are rarely shown in their daily, ordinary lives. As such, their personalities are kept rather two-dimensional and so their fallibilities remain concealed. Weaknesses like kryptonite are permissible because they do not tear at the impregnability of the superhero. Some superheroes are attempts to move away from the stereotypes of the industry, but usually succeed only artificially. There are now representations of minorities and women as token characters to disprove the

unequal representation. Background characters are often nondescriptly tan. Women

with superpowers are often evil, stupidly sexy*, and/or ignored in favor of male

characters. Even with these additions, the most famous superheroes follow the

traditional hero triumvirate of white, male, and violent. Arguably, this trend was to

allow the readers to vicariously return to 'simpler' times when men could be 'men' and

fight against an obvious enemy. Yet the modern day reader is increasingly vocal about

how dissatisfying they find this cursory treatment of their desires. Some are

demanding a fuller, more complete picture of the superhero as a person, a reflection of

broader conduct on all heroes.

The final type of hero is the social hero. This type is a direct response to the

American heroic ideal of male, white, and military. Certainly for the first time in the

last two centuries, Americans are considering people traditionally 'marginalized' as

heroes. Females and effeminate males no longer have to 'man-up' to become admirable

and heroic. Anyone of color, or even of another species for some of the mythic, can be a

hero. Finally, one does not necessarily have to be part of the military or engaged in

violent activities to be a hero. The shift to the social hero has been gradual.

Women are certainly a major focus of the social hero. Their usefulness in a

military setting is still under heavy debate, as evidenced by the plethora books on the

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* 'Stupidly sexy' refers to their outfits, their posing, and to some extent their effectiveness.
Especially in the comics, many female superheroes and villains are borderline pornographic
with their unrealistic proportions and the way they provocatively aimed at the reader,
regardless of the situation.

subject. That debate is mostly based on the physical differences between men and women, and is often at the basis of female-exclusion from hero status as well. Even moving beyond the white, male, and military model, women are awkwardly incorporated into the new hero distinctions. Especially feminine women rarely make full hero status: to feminists they remain too set in the old patriarchy while to others these women are simply too weak for continued heroic action. The idea of the sacrificial and victimized woman replays in this stereotype. Conversely, very masculine women are almost considered aberrations and derided as unnatural or trying too hard to be men. While extreme masculinity in men is praised, like the action hero, it is discouraged for women. As such, women are left an intermediary field to work within.

Perhaps this refusal of extremes for women contributed to the treatment of Jessica Lynch. Lynch was a Private First Class captured by Iraqi insurgents after an ambush and then dramatically rescued by a joint special forces team. Her story was retold with various interpretations where "She was painted as a warrior and hero, a little girl protected by her fallen comrades, a helpless victim, and a broken body."[13] She was used to reinforce the traditional views about women in the military: their need to be rescued, their comparative weaknesses, and their inability to fight. Ironically, though perhaps expected, the other two female soldiers in the same ambush received

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13. Buttsworth, "Who's Afraid of Jessica Lynch?" page 45

hardly any attention. One was killed and the other was captured as well, yet neither fit

the condemning paradigm nearly as well as Lynch[14].

The case of Lynch occurred within the military, but its represents widespread

sexism within the country. The stereotype remains that a woman is in perpetual need

of rescue, ignored, or becomes deviant with power. While the social hero works to

rectify the ignored element of women as a whole, it pointedly ignores women who try

to enter the firmly masculine areas of society, like the military. Mothers can be heroes,

but soldier-mothers who leave their children are questionable. Politician-mothers often

get critiques on their mothering, though fathers in the same positions never face that

type of examination. Areas like the sciences have been more welcoming to women so

figures like Clara Barton, Maria Mayer, and Grace Hopper are considered heroes (of

science). Although there has been improvement in reevaluating potential female

heroes, gaps still exist in the narrative.

Like gender divides, race divides have neglected a large demographic. An

excellent example of recognizing heroes disregarded due to race involves the awarding

of the Medal of Honor in the 1990s. Feeling apologetic, but wanting a way to apologize

without seeming too weak or like an apologist (ironically), the government created two

commissions to study the participation of African-Americans and Asian-Americans in

the Second World War to see if any of them merited the award. No African-American

and only one Asian-American had been given the Medal of Honor during the war. The

two research teams found ten African-Americans meriting reexamination, seven who

14. Buttsworth covers this issue nicely on pages 53-54 in "Who's Afraid of Jessica Lynch?"

received the award, and twenty-two Asian-Americans, all of whom were awarded.

Fifty years after the Second World War, new men were given the award that

automatically makes them heroes. It was not that the Medal of Honor standards were

lowered to include these men, but that new men were critically examined from a new

social perspective. The men awarded in the nineties performed deeds just as heroic as

their contemporaries who won the award, but the racism of the day was cast aside.

These men had all the original traits of the hero, except they were not white. Thus, it

took the advent of the social hero to allow these men to be given their due [15].

There is a final category of the social hero that is less immediately obvious:

youth. This subdivision of the population was less apparent before the twentieth

century, for children were not considered very different from adults. "Historians of the

family argue that European and American views of childhood changed during the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Shorter 1975; Wishy 1968; Zelizer 1985).

Increasingly, children came to be seen in romanticized, sentimental terms, as priceless

innocents who needed protection from a harsh world."[16] Thus, the idea of a 'child hero'

was rather superfluous. But certainly by the start of the twentieth century, children

were a separate entity from the adult. It seems as though children were rarely

considered heroes for most of the century. A few fictional works had children heroes,

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15. McNaughton et al., "Incontestable Proof Will Be Exacted," pages 12, 15, 31-32, 32-33;
    Converse III et al, "The Exclusion of Black Soldiers from the Medal of Honor in World War
    II," pages 7-36, 179-184
16. Best, "Too Much Fun," page 199

like Batman's sidekick Robin or the 'child-hero' of George Orwell's *1984*, but in the realm of reality, very few exist. Of course, there is no exact time when a child becomes an adult, so it also seems that earlier heroes, whom would classify as 'children' in today's society, were considered adults already. Boys who joined the military during wars were often considered 'adults' and not 'children.' In the Civil War a few were even younger than thirteen years of age who participated in actual combat[17]. So were soldiers this young considered soldiers or boys? This issue of coming-of-age was particularly important for males, and war was often an indisputable catalyst to manhood. In fact, a fictional Civil War boy-soldier is a fundamental part of the American mythos.

This paper's historical context begins with Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. The story is a fictional account of a fictional battle about a fictional coward[*]. The book was fully published in 1895, although it had appeared earlier as a serial. Crane was nowhere near any battles of the Civil War. Indeed, his birth occurred after it ended, but this novel still managed to garner high praises for its 'realism'. It also helped solidify and record the elements of the late 19th century American hero.

Initially an introspective, self-reflective character, Henry Fleming is an untested soldier. He mulls over his fears of cowardice and inadequacy early in the novel, often

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17. Davis, 'The Civil War, Strange and Fascinating Facts,' page 63: Most this age, and some as young as ten, were drummers or fifers, as opposed to fighters.

* The battle was mostly likely based on Chancellorsville, but Crane never stated that it was that battle and failed to provide solid evidence that it was actually Chancellorsville.

seeking reassurance from elders and veterans. When his first actual battle arrives, Fleming proves his self-doubts correct and flees. Although distraught at his failure—and the consequent implications for his manhood, honor, and self-worth—Fleming does not completely desert the army. Instead he attempts to rejoin his unit and hide the fact that he ran. A fellow soldier becomes cross and knocks Fleming on the head, allowing him the convenient excuse of an injury to explain his fleeing the battle. Thus the origin of his actual 'red badge of courage' is his continued failure. He eventually reunites with his unit, yet continues to bemoan his poor behavior. His chance at redemption arrives, and in this battle Fleming performs admirably. Fleming picks up a fallen flag and bravely carries it for the rest of the conflict. Although a color-bearer seems unnecessary in modern war, in the Civil War it was a crucial role. It dictated troop movements and kept units together in the smoke-covered battlefields. It was also a decidedly dangerous occupation as it made the carrier an easy target. So Fleming's role as color-bearer was an important and public one that worked to prove his courage. As such, he is then lauded as a hero and that redeems him, at least in his own eyes. Although he ran from his first battle, he returned and behaved as expected, which made him eligible for hero status. He went through his heroic journey and sacrificed for a greater cause[18].

Not everyone agreed with the comments about how realistic Crane's writing felt or Fleming's evolution into a man and a hero. Wrote one veteran: "Nowhere are the quiet, manly, self-respecting, and patriotic men, influenced by the highest sense of duty, who in reality fought our battles...There may have been a moderate number of men in

18. Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*

our service who felt and acted in battle like those in this book; but of such deserters were made."[19] Perhaps Fleming's return was no more than another fictional construct. This alternative image of the soldier was perhaps the construct, but it had been the dominating one in the public imagination. So although the idea of the hero was more homogenous in this period, this quote shows that the idea of the hero was morphing. Fleming was not a hero because he was not a real person and behaved as he should only near the end. In many ways his actions disseminated the hero myth because: "In fact, no moral judgments necessarily result from Henry's flight. If Henry can get away with it (he does), if no one finds out about it (no one does), and if later he can perform 'great deeds' (he does), then that is all that matters."[20] That Fleming's cowardice was never exposed, and was thus shown to be inconsequential in the face of his following actions, tore away at the impregnability of the hero. No longer was he placed on Earth as if by some divine source and fated to be a hero. Instead, he was fallible and he could be created through human decisions. In this sense, the hero was closer to the common person than he had ever been, especially given the sensibilities of the Civil War.

As Gerald Linderman argues in *Embattled Courage*, bravery was the highest moral value to the Civil War soldier. "Courage had for Civil War soldiers a narrow, rigid, and powerful meaning: heroic action undertaken without fear."[21] Drawing from the writings of the soldiers themselves, Linderman states that courage was the hallmark of

19. Bloom, *Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage,* page 31
20. Ibid., page 56
21. Linderman, *Embattled Courage,* page 17

soldierly virtue[22]. Thus Fleming's cowardice and the fact that he faces no consequences for it, directly combats the morality of the Civil War. Certainly, his desire for bravery could be an indication of his desire for righteousness, but his motives seem more selfish. It is important to remember that Fleming was a fictional creation of Crane, meaning that his biases affected the writing. Perhaps Crane felt the now-romantic overtones of the war were absurd and was attempting to challenge the mythos of the conflict. Or perhaps Crane was merely attempting to understand how such morals could be implemented without blindly rushing into harm—although if this was the intention, then Fleming disproves the case. It is also possible Crane was merely reflecting the changing sensibilities of the US. The end of the Civil War had witnessed the first real experiences of total war. Although the destruction and disillusion fell short of the levels of later wars, the burning of the South was a dramatic and painful point towards the changing nature of warfare. Regardless, Fleming's behavior makes him a questionable hero at best—if he could do it, what is to stop anyone from becoming a hero? And if everyone is a hero, then is anyone? This issue of the 'democratic hero' returns full force with the later advent of the citizen-soldier of the Second World War, but in the late 19th Century, the country seemed to be looking for heroes.

The American hero at the time of Crane's writing was exclusively male, exclusively white, and distinctly military-based. The Civil War saw the intertwining of militarism and heroism. However, it is telling that Fleming achieves heroic status even though he did not kill any Confederates. By the 1890's, when the novel was written, the

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22. Ibid., page 7

North and South had decided they were brothers again and that the war had been tragic but not hateful. Had the enemy been racially different, it would have been acceptable to kill some.

The other major American theme portrayed by Fleming is the redemptive hero. Fleming's early sins were washed away by his later actions. The trope of initial failure and eventual triumph is nestled deeply in the national mythos. It spans from the founding to today, even with the current increased cynicism of the nation. The late 19th century was not particular in utilizing this theme. It reappears in all American wars. This theme is rather close to the heart for the US: its role in the early wars was the underdog, yet it managed to achieve victory every time. After the Second World War, this narrative could be extended to the entire breadth of US history. It had begun as a small, loose confederation had risen to international power and prestige. By the end of the 19th century, the country had recovered from the Civil War and was becoming a united, industrial country.

The country was also deeply concerned with redefining masculinity at the turn of the century[23]. There were many worries that boys were being too coddled by their mothers and remaining effeminate for the entirety of their lives. Crane reflected this concern in Fleming's musing about his mother, but then showed the first stage of Fleming's growth into a man by refusing her affections. War, then as now, was considered an easy way to determine who remained a boy and who became a man. States Linderman, "Many soldiers called combat the test of manhood. They often spoke

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23. Gerzon, *A Choice of Heroes,* page 51

of courage as the 'manliest' of virtues…A failure of courage in war was a failure of manhood."[24] Because combat was such proof of manhood, it had the ability to ensure that everyone who successfully participated was a man. Thus, combat was a rite of passage for males. As Barbara Ehrenreich argues in *Blood Rites*, this tradition of violent initiation into manhood has been a hallmark of the human experience since prehistory. It remains so today, though more subtly than in the Civil War.

In the case of Fleming, his initial behavior proved him a boy still. He failed the test of courage, and thus the test of manhood. Despite his superficial attempts early in the story to prove his adulthood, like his treatment of his mother, it was not until near the end of the story that he accomplished his goal. The injury he received would have been masculinizing if he had obtained it under correct circumstances. But even the falsehood in some ways allowed his maturation to occur. When his second chance comes and Fleming actually performs bravely, he becomes a man in his own eyes and those of his fellow soldiers. This collective verification is necessary to the hero as well: others must validate such titles as 'hero' and 'man.' Arguably, at least according to later twentieth century standards, just managing to overcome his flaws made him a hero as well as a man. This theme of man-made-by-war reappears vividly in the rest of the twentieth century.

The next major landmark for the American definition of the hero was the First World War. The US entered the conflict in 1917, two and a half years since the original

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24. Linderman, *Embattled Courage,* page 8

belligerents began fighting. The Army Doughboys were the foundation of the American contribution to the war, with the other branches in auxiliary roles. Given the short period of time the Americans were involved, they had no opportunity to further develop any of the other branches of the military. The Navy was adequate for troop and supply transportation and the German submarine assault was too weak to require significantly more effort from the Americans to combat it. The complexity and newness of air power encouraged Americans to simply utilize British and French patterns of fighting*. Thus, most American attention was given to their Doughboys and it was they who set the standards for American heroism in this war.

There are several key points about the American involvement. The United States, and American Expeditionary Force Commander General John Pershing in particular, wanted to take advantage of the situation and develop a military infrastructure stronger than any other in the world. Pershing was adamant in keeping his forces separate from their European 'associate's' and his stubbornness caused many mistakes. The American addition to the war hastened the end and thus limited their involvement.

The desire to significantly improve the military motivated Pershing's choices. Instead of becoming mere troop replacements for the Europeans, he worked to ensure that the Americans were their own, separate fighting force. Many of his early decisions reflected the poor choices made at the start of the war by the Europeans. The training

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* Some Americans had already joined European air forces earlier in the war, but many remained with those squadrons even once the Americans joined the war

and tactics he sanctioned were inadequate to handle modern warfare, and were very similar to the ones that had resulted in the stalemated situation. Additionally, the American GIs, when they actually began fighting, were unprepared for conditions like those in the trenches and the effects of shell shock, even though those problems had been gaining increasing attention from the Europeans. Necessary artillery rates, supply movements overland, and tactics concerning trench warfare had been worked out by the Europeans, but Pershing chose to largely ignore this information[25].

The American Expeditionary Force was woefully unprepared for the war. Yet they were a very poignant threat to the Allied forces (composed of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire) because they were fresh and had a massive infrastructure backing them that could be mobilized. The US was so late to the war and such a pivotal push towards the end that a couple of points developed. The US did not have time to mobilize itself fully into a 'warfare state,' but the procedures for that to occur were instituted. During the interwar years, the US worked to improve its naval, aerial, and ground forces, all based on what it experienced and witnessed during the Great War. Perhaps most important to the upcoming war, the US was put into a position of massive financial superiority. That, coupled with the victory of the Entente, gave the whole war a mild morally righteous aura that would expand with the Second World War.

Essentially, there was no time for a spectrum of American heroes to develop. Two dominant images exist for the Great War: aces fighting aerial duels and the

25. Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War*, page 325

soldiers suffering in the trenches. The air war was cleaner and received the romantic

attentions of the war, even as the ground war continued to drag through its attritional

stalemate. America found a hero for each type: Eddie Rickenbacker in the air and

Sergeant York on the ground.

As the American ace of aces, Rickenbacker only had 26 kills to his name: less

than a third of the kills earned by Manfred von Richthofen, the highest scoring ace of

the war. Such a rate makes sense considering that Rickenbacker's first kill occurred on

April 29, 1918; most aces had begun flying much earlier and there were less than seven

months left of the war. There was simply not enough time for Rickenbacker to do

more[26].

Although Sergeant York was initially a conscientious objector, he became the

figurehead of the American doughboys. He was drafted and, after struggling with the

religious implications, agreed to serve. Hardened by an active lifestyle that including

hunting and tracking, he was physically well prepared for the war. However, his

mountain upbringing kept him rather isolated and he struggled to adjust to his fellow

recruits at training. But once he reached France, he performed brilliantly. He famously

killed twenty-seven Germans and convinced a machine-gun battalion to surrender by

himself[27]. Such a feat seemed impossible and immediately propelled York to fame.

Many World War Two era heroes got their start in this war, but did nothing

particularly astonishing. Examples include Dwight D. Eisenhower, General George

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26. Rickenbacker, *Rickenbacker,* pages 95 and 133
27. Skeyhill, *Sergeant York,* pages 15-16

Patton, and General Douglas MacArthur. Figures like Rickenbacker and Sergeant York

were definitely traditional heroes, but failed to stay in the American conscious in any

major way. Figures like the Red Baron (Manfred von Richthofen) and Edward

Mannock were killed in the war and so their immortalized image was them as young

and brilliant fighter pilots. Since Rickenbacker and York lived through the war, they

returned to the States and had a chance to become human and fallible. Rickenbacker

became involved with the government and running his own airline, but was rather

adamant about not capitalizing on his fame from the war. Certainly, the excitement

around Charles Lindbergh and his flight across the Atlantic captured much of the

aviation-minded excitement in the early twentieth century. The flight made the world

smaller and it was a peaceful action. By the late 1920s, people were ready to forget the

horrors of the war and focus on getting rich. York meanwhile refused most offers

concerning his fame, except for a farm situated near his home county. He then focused

on building schools and roads in the surrounding area[28]. Since his focus was so limited,

there was little interaction with him or his legacy on a national level.

Perhaps another reason there were hardly any heroes was because the

Doughboys were the main type of soldier. In this war the GIs were mostly draftees, but

the draft was considered a positive and equalizing institution that enabled men to fulfill

their duty to their country. (And they were men for serving.) Unlike Great Britain

which turned to the draft under desperation, the US immediately turned to a drafted

army at the declaration of war. This worked out very well for the US. Given that

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28. Ibid., pages 232-235

nationalism was high and the draftees willing to comply, there were very few protesters or draft-dodgers, instead the army was populated by citizen-soldiers. This new type of citizen-soldier worked to mold the military, a rather fitting democratic goal. By the end of war, three-fourths of the army was draftees[29]. Few discernable differences could be made between enlistees and draftees. The citizen-soldier was born and settled into the American mindset.

The mechanized mass killings of the Great War definitely made an impact on the idea of the hero. Increased range was a factor as it lessened the potency of an individual warrior. The horrific types of killing also contributed to the questioning of the hero definition. Scattered lumps of meat were unavailable to give evocative death soliloquies. The entire war was as shocking as the deaths were instant and horrific on a level previously unseen. An almost brutal, unfeeling mindset developed for most, resulting in graphic descriptions of the carnage. The strongest factor working against the traditional sort of hero was the scale of the conflict. The losses were astronomical. A community's entire body of men could and were nearly completely obliterated, sometimes in mere hours. Body counts from major offensives like the Somme and the life-to-service-time ratio were higher than had been imagined. For everyone involved, so practically the entire world, there was suddenly a massive amount of material to process. It was no longer a single cavalry unit that heroically martyred itself, but entire villages and armies. The losses were so incomprehensible that no one really knew how

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29. Keene, *Doughboys, The Great War, and the Remaking of America,* pages 1-15 covers the major elements of the draft, though her entire book is recommended.

to deal with the whole situation. Endurance became an important factor of survival and heroism. The brutal conditions, especially around the major offensives, continued unabated for such lengthy periods that just remaining functional became admirable.

The scale of the war meant that no one was able to greatly impact it. Certain types of people were singled out for special focus though. Richthofen scored 80 victories, but there were 5182 pilots on the Western Front by the end of the war. For the British, indicative to some extent of the other major powers, pilots made only 2% of the Air Force, which was only 3% of British manpower in 1918[30]. So even though the Red Baron was singled out for his exemplary performance, his overall impact on the physical side of the war was next to nothing. On the other hand, his morale boosting was some of the best in the war. Richthofen responded well to his hero status and he performed his duties very well. Richthofen also had the advance of being a pilot. Because the air war seemed cleaner and more meaningful than the trenches[*], his status was elevated. In all areas of the war, there were heroic deeds to potentially valorize; the issue was choosing which deserved especial focus. Even the US had some issues concerning the large numbers. The Medal of Honor, often considered the hallmark of American military bravery, was rigidly redefined in the Great War so that it would be the prestigious award it is today. A spectrum of other awards and medals were created

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30. Winter, *The First of the Few*, Pages 11-12, 153

* The war in the air was a romanticized one. Not only was the notion of individual combat appealing in such a massive war, but each pilot's talents actually mattered. It was not a war of simply pointing a machine gun at a long line of advancing enemies and shooting until the gun overheated, but one that required personal skill and was very apparent, high in the air above everything as it were.

for lesser acts as well. The issue of massive numbers remained a potent factor for the

increasingly globalized world.

Not only were the numbers staggering, but the type of person fighting was

different. In conflicts like the Napoleonic wars, only professionalized soldiers were

involved[31]. Some farmers or villages would be affected by war, but mostly it was only

volunteers and not civilians. The Americans did not participate in any Napoleonic type

wars, but a similar pattern existed both in the responses to the Native Americans and

the Civil War. Only the 'frontiersmen' would venture into the wild lands to deal with

the Native Americans and given their less-than-human status, it really did not matter

how detrimental such actions were to the Native Americans. The Civil War was

likewise fought mostly by men who volunteered[32]. Near the end of that war, as the

battlegrounds spread, civilians and noncombatants were increasingly affected[33]. The

idea of total war was born, but was only beginning to influence the definition of hero.

Likewise, the advent of the citizen-soldier was entrenched in the American mindset, but

had yet to fully develop. The major changes would occur in the next major conflict.

The 1920s and 1930s saw mild social upheaval, but most of it was economically

based. Social conceptions like heroes were hardly impacted. Masculinity was

decidedly stable, although the roles and rights of women were to a minor extent being

revised. Technology experienced huge innovations; devices like the radio, effective

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31. Parker, *Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare,* pages 192-213
32. Estimates put the South as having only 10 to 21% draftees by the desperate end and the
    North around 8%. Keene, *Doughboys, The Great War, and the Remaking of America,* page 2.
33. Gerzon, *A Choice of Heroes*, expands on the frontiersman as an American archetype

tanks, and aircraft carriers promised that the next conflict would be massive. However, this era saw the advent of new types of the mythic hero, although he was for the most part still just called a 'hero'. Before, folktales and myths had been the sources of the mythic hero, but the print hero bloomed in these two decades. Serial magazines were showcasing heroes that deviated from the traditional, more moral type of American hero. Darker characters like Sam Spade and the other hardboiled, rough-edged types came into their own during this period. Also, in 1937, the 'superhero' was permanently established with the first *Action Comics* featuring Superman[34]. The popularity of the superhero has waxed and waned over the last seven decades, but remains a potent media figure today.

Then, in 1939, war hit Europe. It expanded through the next two years until the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, when the US threw itself into the war. Often cited as a high point for American society and the military, the impact of the war was and still is astronomical. The war continued the trend from the first war of using an army that relied heavily on the draft. The infrastructure and patterns established during the Great War allowed the country to mobilize on a truly massive scale[35]. Perhaps most impressive of all was the citizens' commitment to the war and their willingness to sacrifice for it. Men, and some women, were willing to enlist in the

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34. Wandtke, *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!,* page 5
35. Ferguson, *The War of the World,* page 527

military despite the expected hardships. On the home front, there were numerous campaigns to donate or save items and materials for the war effort.

In fact, the war effort dominated society for the four years the US participated in the war. Admittedly, this was the closest the US ever came to a 'total war'—the entire country was working toward winning and were arguably willing to do whatever it took to win. However, there was one stark difference about 'total war' for the Americans: very little of the fighting happened on home soil and it was never anywhere near major civilian centers. (The fighting was on the Aleutian Islands and involved a small number of military personal specially prepared for the harsh conditions; they were known as 'Castner's Cutthroats'[36].) During the war itself, Americans did not have to contend with protecting their land while attempting to train and supply massive amounts of troops. Thus, when the end came, the US as a country had suffered comparatively light hardships and did not need to be rebuilt, unlike most of the other powers[37].

The concept of the citizen-soldier came into its own during World War II. The public image was of an everyday, ordinary man who was thrust into an extraordinary situation. Given the fact that he was American, and thus had impeccable morals and necessary skills, he would adapt to the situation while he had to, do his job, and return home to his normal life after serving his country. The fact that most of the men fighting had grown up in the Great Depression encouraged the sense that the military was just

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36. Garfield, *Thousand-Mile War*, page 170
37. Kennedy's final two chapters in *Freedom from Fear* cover the aftermath of the war

another job to be completed[38]. The idea that all US troops were homegrown and only temporarily warriors was a comforting one. Although there was some apprehension about large quantities of soldiers returning at the end of the war and causing havoc, the imposed ephemeral nature of their warrior status helped ensured that most settled back into society without too much difficulty. (There was some readjustment, such as the controversies about women having taken men's jobs, but the rough patches were a far cry from the predicted violent upheaval[39].) The soldiers were encouraged to think of themselves as normal men, temporarily serving their country in an extraordinary setting that would end soon. Thus, all soldiers were similar to the son, husband, or father who had also gone off to war and deserved absolute respect and support. Additionally, they were all of them heroes for serving the country. The issue of everyone as a hero worked very well for the Second World War, but would cause new tensions during the Vietnam War.

This idea of the democratic hero is still a foundation of American heroism. During World War Two, the nation was working for such an important cause that any participation granted hero status. Families who supplemented meals with homegrown produce or conversed rubber for the war effort were heroic. Grocers who maintained prices to prevent inflation were heroic. Soldiers, by the amount they had to sacrifice, were the most heroic of all. The image of everyone participating in the war effort created a near-mythic picture of a deeply united and motivated country. The

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38. Linderman, *The World Within War*
39. Stur, *Beyond Combat,* page 147

democratic hero, who was the creation of all participating freely and near-equally,

became the defining trope of the US in World War Two.

The Second World War lives on in the American mindset as the great moral war.

Beginning with America's retaliatory entry, the US was able to find extensive

arguments to make that case. The consensus was that the Japanese sneak attack on

Pearl Harbor was unprovoked, and thus the US response was justified. Likewise, when

the seemingly more fanatic actions of the Japanese came to light, it was argued that they

needed democratic liberation from their imperialistic, warlike mindset, even if it meant

killing them in wholesale lots. Things like the cannibalism on some of the islands and

the Kamikaze attacks made soldiers all the braver for fighting them. (And the

Americans still had some lingering sentiments from their Civil War— bravery was

epitomized.) Perhaps in response to the Japanese seeming to actively seek their death,

self-preservation was becoming a higher goal for Americans. They still fought for their

'buddies' and the guy to next to them, but the desired 'million-dollar-wound,' that

injured but did not disable, was a far cry from the glory of wounds during the Civil

War[40]. Additionally, preemptive strikes against a country that would fight back, down

to the last bamboo-spear wielding child, saved American lives. While the actual use of

nuclear weapons is still morally contested, the US and Japan were in a war against each

other and thus weapons of some sort would be used. Regardless of the disputed

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40. Linderman, *Embattled Courage,* page 12 – In the Civil War, *how* the wound was received was the most important element, at least in the mythic imagery of the war. That situational heroism was decidedly different from the 'million-dollar-wound.' World War II soldiers hoped for a wound on an extremity that proved serious enough to get them sent home without disabling them permanently.

necessity of nuclear use, to many Americans it was justified as an act of war against a violent nation that spared American lives[41].

As for the Germans, Hitler was an excellent moral opposite even before US entry. His invasion of Poland, a hypocritical act from an agreement made only years prior, coupled with his socialism and blitzkrieg made him an excellent target for democracy. Democracy was also the answer to the Socialists of Germany just as it was to the Imperialists of Japan. There was a bit of awkwardness about working with the Communists in the Soviet Union, but that alliance quickly crumbled once the other threats were negated. Then, late in the war with the discovery of the concentration camps, the fight against the Nazis was indisputably morally righteous. No longer was it just a matter of politics, but about the very existence of humanity. The fact that there were so many killings in often brutal ways was nearly incomprehensible. Of course anyone who fought against such wide-spread atrocities was brave and morally in the right: the leap to 'hero' became an easy one.

In fact, the Second World War spawned the highest concentration of American heroes during the twentieth century. High ranking officers like Dwight Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, George Patton; groups like the Band of Brothers or the Marines on Iwo Jima; even unconventional figures like Franklin Roosevelt and Rosie the Riveter received the heroic status during this war. The collective heroism of the war was partially opening the way for the social hero. All are to some extent remembered by the general public, even though their participation in the war and what they did afterwards

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41. Winnacker, "The Debate about Hiroshima," pages 25-30

varied drastically. Even Rosie the Riveter, a mythic propaganda figure, is referenced in pop culture*. The legacies are enduring for a number of reasons, though some should receive particular attention. The Great War is nearing its centennial and the last American veteran passed away in early 2011[42]. It is far enough away, both in time and space, that it has understandably faded in the American consciousness. But World War II is decidedly closer: many have family members who fought during or can remember those years. Publicly sharing those experiences has become more socially acceptable than it ever was for people from the Great War generation. There is a horrific fascination with the Holocaust that motivates a truly massive amount of study, and of course that generates interest for the American side of things. Plus, many of the heroic figures either died or did well for themselves after the war and so did not tarnish their reputations.

Even though the Second World War seemed to solve a number of problems, it also generated a whole new set that would prove decidedly more terrifying. The advent and use of nuclear weapons as well as the rapid spread of communism culminated in the Cold War. The degenerative death of imperialism sent shockwaves through the world. Globalism and intervention would need defining and refining. But most of these problems were not immediately apparent, as can be seen by the Korean War and the Vietnam War, both of which started in the 1950s.

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* Numerous feminism-related campaigns have used her, pop artist P!nk dressed as her in a music video, and even presidential elections have utilized her, among others.
42. Courson, "Last Living US World War I Veteran Dies"

With the world just beginning to recover from the destruction of the Second World War and undergoing the realignments of nations and ideologies, the US entered into the Korean War in 1950. More so than perhaps any other war of the US in the twentieth century, the Korean War was a product of the previous war. Flush with their total victory in the Second World War, probably harboring lingering racist attitudes towards East Asians, and using much of the same equipment and methods, the US moved into the Korean War with high expectations of their own performance. The initial repulsion of North Korean forces from the lower part of the peninsula was reasonably successful, both in terms of loss and limitations on methods that ensured it remained a limited conflict. However, when the Chinese supported the North Koreans and the UN forces attempted to reclaim the north both physically and ideologically, progress halted to the point where the front began to resemble the Great War. It essentially devolved into static trenches that were nearly impenetrable.

Although the US had access to more powerful and longer-ranged weaponry and aircraft (that could have easily reached China), it did not utilize these advantages for fear that the Soviet Union would join the fray on the side of its fellow communists. None of the other nations that participated in the conflict as allies of the US (by way of the UN) were willing to add significantly to the conflict. Most of them had suffered more devastation in the Second World War and were more concerned about developments on the European continent than a small, seemingly insignificant country in Southeast Asia. Thus, the USSR presented a definite impediment to the US's grand ambitions. It too had access to the atom bomb and it was pretty obvious that should the

two super powers unleash their full potential, the world would be exterminated. With almost no communication, both sides kept the war limited in many ways that it ended in a stalemate, but did not escalate to apocalyptic proportions[43].

As for heroes, this war was strangely blank. Many of the same figures participated in both wars, such as MacArthur who had been the Pacific hero in the previous war. Many of the lower ranked soldiers were already veterans. Even the military was cautious about which troops it used: it was a reservist' war for the first two years. Even though technology had advanced, with soldiers of the last war in charge, only jets and helicopters were used to any extent. The potential of those two vehicles would not be realized until the Vietnam War. Most heroes were already established and merely added onto to their legacy in the Korean War. The two highest scoring aces of the war had flown in the Second World War, as had others (some of whom were already aces)[44]. All three of the Generals in charge during the conflict had held command positions during World War II. Given the short duration of the war, its proximity to the Second World War, and the fact there were very few new people in charge, the Korean War is easily tacked onto the Second World War and more or less ignored. But the nature of war was changing, and the Korean War showed it. Most obviously, the impending threat of total annihilation contradicted the progressive ideals that had perpetrated the earlier conflicts. The war was not heroic, but neither was it 'unheroic'.

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43. James' *Refighting the Last War* does a nice coverage of the American side of the Korean War
      and the aspects discussed here
44. Werrell, *Sabres over MiG Alley*, pages 144-192

The Korean War was a strange combination of the remnants of the previous war and a foreshadowing of the next. As such, it receives massive comparisons to the wars on either side. Although the Korean War had clearer objectives than the Vietnam War, both totally misread the local populations. In Korea though, the southern populace was receptive to American intervention and managed to establish a firm enough government that also suited American desires. But the liberation invasion of the north proved foolhardy given their commitment to the communist cause. Ignoring the wishes of the local population would be much more apparent in the upcoming conflict. The Korean War solidified the uneasy, unofficial truce between the nuclear-armed nations. That hold-fire would structure the Vietnam War when the conflicting imperialistic nations clashed once again. The Korean War could still retain the title of 'moral war,' but it was much more ambiguous[*]. Splitting Korea in two parts allowed both sides a sort of victory and the compromise promoted an uneasy peace that lasted. But the US was not yet ready to accept less than total victory as a possible war ideology, despite the lessons from the Korean War.

Within two years of the Korean Armistice, the US entered the Vietnam War. The war's duration of twenty years had much to do with its legacy. No other American war had occurred that was simultaneously so brutal, so limited, and so long. The length

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[*] It could be argued that the 'moral war' trope was possible largely because South Korea managed to remain an independent and functioning country. Given their current friendly relations with the US, the fact that US troops are still stationed in South Korea, and the visible and continued antagonism of North Korea, it is rather easy to see the Korean War as a justified one.

ensured that major changes could occur in all fields of society: technology and tactics for the military, medicine and new awareness of numerous mental conditions, changes in gender and race relations, and new national services. It was a strange war to fight, and that strangeness remains when discussing it today.

The Vietnam War was a far cry from any other American war up to that point. It was very long; every other major American war had lasted no longer than five years. The Vietnam War had obscure goals that were more political than operational, required unacceptably large amounts of men and supplies, seemed to do nothing but create wastage for the US, and were not 'war-winning'. The limitations hugely affected the American way of war. Certainly in the Second World War, the country was willing to go all out for a victory. The threat of nuclear annihilation ensured that the US was very careful about keeping the war contained to Vietnam.

How the US decided to go about limiting the war seems foolish in hindsight. Air power had won the day in the World War II campaign against Japan, but only by resorting to the atomic bombs. The firebombing had been horrific, but not decisive. In the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, air power was as effective as the firebombing had been—it hurt, but it was manageable and did not discourage continued combat. Even the later precision bombing of the war was inadequate to achieve all the desired ends without completely leveling the country. Likewise, staying out of neighboring countries, 'officially,' meant that there were lots of supply trails for the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong to utilize. Even when President Nixon authorized the clandestine bombing of Cambodia, it was completely ineffectual for achieving the

desired results. Instead, the US just wasted vast sums of money and material. The fact that ground troops, when they were finally deployed, were doomed to repeatedly cover the same areas was an unquestionable difference from the previous wars, when gains and losses had been measurable by land taken. The shift in the criterion of victory from land gained to enemy killed was a rather shocking one. With the advent of statistics, the meanings of the death tolls were easily manipulated. Faith in the government and country as a whole declined rapidly in the face of manipulated evidence. On the home front, never had there been an antiwar movement so large, so organized, and so violent (ironically).

The impact of the Vietnam War is heightened by its proximity. It was also radically anomalous to previous American experience. People are still attempting to understand it and decide the canonical way to interact with it. Was it a pointless, extended massacre of innocents and people that should have been left alone? Was it a righteous cause that was worth pursuing, even if the goals were not achieved? Was it some combination of the two or something entirely different? Right now, scholarship says 'yes' to all of the above. Even specific issues are still up for debate. The effects of Agent Orange, which is often used as indicative of all the evils of the war, are in question thanks to research by B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley[*]. People from that conflict are alive, vocal, and many are in positions of power, whether as parents or as

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[*] Their book, *Stolen Valor*, is a worthwhile read for anyone with interest in the Vietnam War. While debatable, its points are decidedly compelling.

government leaders. Their perceptions and reactions to the war are very much a part of current American culture, however subtly.

The Vietnam War inherited some unexpected elements of World War II. The 'Greatest Generation' was in charge during most of the Vietnam War, and was understandably influenced by its experiences with the Second World War. The complete-mobilization and full-frontal assault style had worked in that war, but would have caused global annihilation if used against the Soviet Union. A new method of warfare had to be adopted, but no alternatives achieved the same goals and allowed for the same type of glory. The fact that the USSR was threatening, but had not actually *done* anything overly aggressive created new types of challenges. The idea of stalemate ensured the need for balance. The US had to remain vigilant, patient, and ready, without instigating or being too passive. It was counter to the major lessons of World War II, when speed, action, and power had been successful. The standoff with the Soviet Union was nowhere near as celebrated as the fighting of World War II. In that war, every soldier had been a hero. In the context of the Cold War, it was hard for anyone to be a hero: too much action was suicidal and too little action was not heroic.

The idea of the citizen-soldier as developed in World War II promoted a complete unity of the armed forces in the popular mind. All of the military was performing admirable jobs and since all were rooted in society, they were all citizen-soldiers and democratic heroes. Given their training to perform in hierarchical units, it was not illogical to think of them as closely grouped. That perception of the military as a single-minded force remained through the Vietnam War. But the idea of the

democratic hero failed in Vietnam. This war did not have the moral reasoning, the willingness, or the ability to fight that the Second World War possessed. The harsher elements of the war could not be salved by moral superiority or necessity. Television and other media ensured that all the horrific details were easily accessible. The democratic hero stereotype was inverted: because soldiers were a singular group, *all* of them were responsible for the war—*all* of them were "baby-killers."

The role of the government also changed thanks to the Second World War. The full results of FDR's New Deal were compromised due to the war and his death in 1945 ended the longest reign of any president. The government lost the cohesion the Great Depression and World War II created. The McCarthyism of the 1950s gave the government a suspicious and controlling air, which began to disfigure its image as the US's stronghold. The inner turmoil and poor handling of the Vietnam War increased the vision of the government as an entity separate from the public it ostensibly served. It became a body of its own, inclined toward destruction and greed, something to be mistrusted and despised. It was foolish to fight for the 'greater good,' because it no longer existed.

During the twenty years of the Vietnam War, the definition of 'hero' experienced much criticism. The exemplars of American heroism had in the previous century been militaristic, male, and white. Although minorities had fought in every war, they were largely ignored. With the Vietnam War, those minorities were accepted, obvious, and necessary. Although whiteness still helped, it was no longer a definitive part of heroism. The shift away from white dominance was compounded by the race riots and

civil rights movements back stateside[45]. Maleness as a qualification for heroics

remained rather firm through this period, but the sexual revolution was slowly wearing

away at its impregnability, both on the side of women and in redefining gender.

Finally, the connection between combat service and heroism was rapidly unraveling. If

soldiers were no longer honorable, either by their actions or by their association with

the government, then they could not be heroes. In this war, 'boys' were sent to war and

'heroes' were the ones who stayed home. If the traditional type of hero was now

disregarded or derided, then heroes would have to be found elsewhere.

In many ways, the Vietnam War was to Americans what the Great War had been

to the Europeans. The intense guilt, the high-tech slaughter that actually accomplished

little but destruction, and the loss of a generation were hallmarks of both wars. For

Americans, their lost generation was not because they had all been killed in the war.

The rise of PTSD and soldier shame, the social revolutions, and the rise of separated

individualism very much created a lost generation. People hid their identities because

they were hiding from the draft, from their veteran status, or from the terrifying

realities of the nuclear age. There was so much anger that tensions seemed high all the

time. There were peace protests that ironically used napalm. News was broadcast

straight into people's homes making the war accessible to everyone. For the first time,

there was a sharp disconnect between age groups, and expected behaviors for each[46]. It

is no wonder that those twenty years were so tumultuous. Even seemingly joyful

45. Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided,* pages 21-42
46. Ibid., pages 138-157

events like walking on the moon were overshadowed by the heady mix of anger, youth, and looming annihilation that gripped the country.

Although the Cold War was not wholly responsible for the increased sensitivity to 'collateral damage,' it contributed. In World War Two, the idea of 'total war' had ensured that everyone was a part of the war effort. As such, even civilians could be considered acceptable targets for acts of war under extreme conditions, but they were always regarded as innocents in principle. Post-World War II saw an explicit shift away from total war: the Korean War had established limitations that the Vietnam War had to follow. On the high end, the threat of nuclear war meant a power like the US could not go 'full-out' on an enemy without ensuring mutual destruction. On the more personal level, the value of life was increasing and death was becoming less acceptable. Quality of life was generally higher and fighting for ideals like the nation or duty seemed foolish. In the Second World War, death had been a necessary but noble event. In the Vietnam War, loss of life was only considered wasteful.

Civilians in the Vietnam War were not as innocent as the popular narrative depicted them. The Vietnamese often hid VC weapons or fighters. They also helped plant or detonate explosives. The media rarely showed this side of the fight and instead only showed the retaliations of the Americans. The massacre at My Lai, which has become one of the defining battles of the war, was not solely an act of unprovoked rage. Although some civilians crossed the line to combatant, there were no clear definitions of who should be a target. An eight-year-old planting a bomb was clearly not an innocent civilian, but he was also a child. His death did not fit into the heroic American

narrative. Whose life was more important: the combatant-child's or the blown-up

soldiers'? Like the rest of the war, the lack of distinctions prevented a triumphant

telling and encouraged a disparaging view of the whole affair.

Perceptions of death, as was mentioned above, were changing as well. Self-

preservation became the main goal of the soldier. Protecting comrades and self was the

only obvious objective of the war. It was pointless to fight for the 'greater good.' The

government was corrupt, the folks back 'in the real world' did not understand, and

former peers who stayed home were contemptuous and hateful. Even the Vietnamese

were ungrateful of American intervention. It seemed the 'greater good' did not exist

anymore. Also, the quality of life was rising for those living in first-world countries*.

There was, quite literally, more to live for back home. The military, for most

Americans, was no longer a career that taught employable skills and was the impetus

for further advancement in life. That sort of education was increasingly available to

everyone. By the time of the Vietnam War, the GI Bill had made college a presumed

necessity in the American mindset. It was a viable alternative to military service, both

in terms of potential skills and possible honor. Thus, sacrifice in war was not admirable

or acceptable, but horrific and careless.

Where were heroes to be found in this mess? Soldiers, those few who became

heroes, were regulated to the antihero or action hero. Most public attention turned

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* "The term 'Third World' was [first] used in 1952 …The term embraced notions of political powerlessness, economic poverty and social marginalization…Within the context of the ideologically bifurcated world of the Cold War, this group necessarily occupied a political space between the *First World capitalist states and Second World socialist states*…" Thomas, "Where is the Third World Now?" page 226, emphasis added

towards the social hero and its potential participants. Non-violent, non-male, and non-white heroes began to receive praises *as* heroes. Martin Luther King Jr. was openly against the Vietnam War and violence in general. Yet he has become a national hero and is celebrated annually. (It is notable that military-based holidays like Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, and Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day receive decreasing attention.) Positive interpretations of the soldiers are still hard to find on a national level. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the idea of the citizen-soldier unconsciously shifted to victim-soldier.

The issue of victimization really reared its ugly head in this war and bit a chunk out of the country. It seems the bit it swallowed was pride. Everyone was a victim of some sort: of the draft, of the war, of the peace protesters, of parents, of the government, of not being understood, the list went on. No one was to blame for anything, yet everyone let it all happen. It became much easier to blame someone else, and that failing, some institution. There was no satisfying target for the blame. The idea of mass victimization began in the war, but it really solidified itself in the decade following the fall of Saigon. With new additions like *Rambo,* PTSD, and the VVA, the idea of the soldier as victim became a permanent feature of American ideology. The traditional hero or the rogue gave way to the victim-soldier or the villain-soldier. Now it was not soldier's fault if he was deranged: it was because he had been a soldier. All of them were broken for having participated, even those who volunteered. It was generally assumed that all soldiers suffered from PTSD too. Could a victim be a hero too?

In the late seventies and the eighties, it seemed that yes, a victim could be a hero. In the case of the Iranian Embassy in 1979-81, all of the hostages were considered heroes (at least by some) for having been victims[47]. In a move away from the elusive hero and the stringent requirements that role demanded, the democratic hero had morphed to include everyone, even those not working for a national cause. What was heroic about being a hostage? Certainly, it was a scary experience, but the situation was not intentional and did not allow for commendable action. POWs were different: they were in a setting of war instead of an embassy. Their capture was an act of war, not terrorism. The 'hero' of the past was gone, but there was no consensus on his replacement.

Two children shows from the eighties highlighted the nebulous status of heroes during this decade: *GI Joe: A Real American Hero* and *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*. The openings of both shows establish them clearly:

> *GI Joe*: "G.I. Joe is the code name for America's daring, highly trained special mission force. Its purpose: to defend human freedom against Cobra, a ruthless terrorist organization determined to rule the world."
> *Captain Planet*: "Our world is in peril. Gaia, the spirit of the Earth, can no longer stand the terrible destruction plaguing our planet. She gives five special rings to five special young people. From Africa, Kwame with the power of earth. From the North America, Wheeler with the power of fire. From the Soviet Union, Linka with the power of wind. From Asia, Gi with the power of water and from South America, Ma-Ti with the power of heart. With the five powers combined they summon earth's greatest champion - CAPTAIN PLANET!"

47. Tucker, "Facets II," page 25

Both featured core American values, but drew them from very opposite ends of the social spectrum. *GI Joe* was a triumphant return to a skilled military, composed of 'Real American Heroes,' fighting a force inherently evil*. Meanwhile, *Captain Planet* focused on the new threats of eco-disasters brought on by human choices, which could only be fought by the united effort of everyone.

GI Joe: A Real American Hero was the first incarnation of six shows and began in 1985. Absolutely rife with hypermasculine elements, this show was a blatant attempt to return to the glory days of the military. All of the characters embodied stereotypes. On the side of the 'Joes' there is Duke, the de facto leader, is pale, blonde, and blue-eyed; Scarlet, the only female, shoots a crossbow whose bolts open into nets instead of killing people, is curvy instead of buff, and wears a bodysuit; and Stalker is the black lead. All are military personnel, skilled to an unrealistic level, and joined by a plethora of other stereotypes (like the quantities of southern accents and token racial characters). The 'Joes' were not the soldiers of World War II. They were not in the military temporarily or expected to return to civilian life. The show did attempt to promote American-ness by having both sexes and many races present. They were blunt representations, but it was a sort of homage to the democratic hero. Despite their obviously elite positions and training, the 'Joes' are based on the idea of the ordinary GI Joe from World War II: they were down-to-earth people from all walks of life doing their jobs. Significantly, the two

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* Much of the discussion on the *GI Joe* series has centered around its origins instead of the show itself. It was based on a line of toys and so most of the arguments concern the introduction of commercialism to children's television programming. The idea of capitalizing on heroism is not addressed in this paper, but it would make an interesting study.

main evil leads are Cobra Commander and Destro; both are male and completely covered. Their minions are faceless and expendable. The clothing in the show is obviously drawn from popular images of soldiers during the eighties: berets, tank tops, and cameo are in abundance.

The show also drew inspiration from the *Star Wars* trilogy, which had initially been released in 1977, 1980, and 1983. The explosions, sound effects, and technology (like jet packs and laser pistols) would not seem out of place in *Star Wars*. The ratio of massive amounts of firepower to actual hits was very *Star Wars*-esque. The anonymous minions, their unending numbers, and lack of meaning are reminiscent of the Storm Troopers. Given the success of *Star Wars* in returning to the tropes of earlier decades, it is no wonder that *GI Joe* emulated it so much.

Captain Planet was a decidedly different type of show. It began airing in 1990 and included a range of liberal elements presented in a socially-aware, kid-friendly package. Ecological preservation took center stage, but other heady issues like HIV/AIDS and drug abuse received some attention as well. The characters themselves managed to portray every element of the social hero while adhering to some fundamental American values.

The five children, Captain Planet, and Mother Earth compose the main cast and all deviate from the classical hero. Captain Planet resides in the mythic realm, given his blue skin and elemental powers. His weaknesses are pollutants and other substances toxic to the earth, a variation on the Superman model. In fact, apart from the coloration and source of powers, Captain Planet is essentially a retake on Superman. But while

Superman has no limitations save the ones he sets himself, Captain Planet can only be summoned by the five children combining the power of their magic rings. Those rings were gifts from Mother Earth, the personification of the planet. Perhaps not surprisingly, she is a very feminine character in appearance, powers, and empathy. Although the entire purpose of the show is to "Save the Earth," the personification of the earth receives very little attention, except as a maternal figure that is always giving and needs to be saved. The children themselves are representative of the social hero by their races, genders, and ages. They are all teenagers, following the trend of adolescent heroes. Their races are American (white from Brooklyn), Soviet (then 'Eastern European' after its dissolution), Asian, African, and South American. Only the American and Soviet are associated with actual countries—predictable given the American origins of the show. The Soviet and Asian were the two females, perhaps because those areas were the most threatening at the time. The show, whether consciously or not, also worked on disseminating the gender-binary. The South American controls the power of 'heart,' is not physically dominant, and is rather effeminate, yet remains a necessary component of the team.

The idea of the team fighting for each other and the greater good of all have long been core American values, especially in war settings. *Captain Planet* bluntly built on those values. Saving the planet was morally righteous by the late eighties—the harms of deforestation, pollution, and waste were well known. Further, the idea that ordinary citizens could perform well when commanded and then return to normal life was also an obvious element of the show. Certainly, the five were admirable people, but their

mystic power is granted by a goddess and they actually *do* very little about saving the planet. Mostly, they observe the problems, summon Captain Planet to fix them, and then give quick suggestions that everyone can follow, like turning off the lights or recycling. Thus, they are more heroic by association and morals than deeds.   The show also borrows the American ideal of the redemptive hero: although blame for the condition of the planet is shared evenly, it can still be saved. The central message of the show is that Earth needs the viewer to do what they can to help, and that the united effort is the only way to succeed. Indeed, "The power is *yours*!" is repeated constantly, in every episode. Thus, saving the planet, and the future, falls onto the shoulders of the democratic hero: anyone can be and is a hero by recycling or unplugging electronics and other small, 'green' actions.

Then, in 1990, the US went to war again. The First Gulf War, in direct response to the length of the Vietnam War, was incredibly short. It also had clear, achievable goals that ensured the US did not get bogged down in a messy war. There is little to say about this war, because there was little of this war. The military, also backed by the UN for legitimacy, went in, won decisively, and left just as quickly. It did not stay to help democratize a country. It did not attempt to help a nation that did not want it. It tried very hard to avoid all the mistakes of the previous war. It worked, but it did not 'cure' the 'Vietnam Syndrome.'

Most of those in power had been teenagers during the Vietnam War. Now was their chance to rectify the mistakes of their parents and grandparents. Saddam Hussein

was comparable to Hitler for the older generations, while the involvement in a far-off

Eastern country was comparable to Vietnam for the younger generations[48]. Command

of the war rested in the hands of those who had come of age during the Vietnam War

and ending the 'Vietnam Syndrome' was one of their top priorities.

There was no time for people to apply the changed standards of the 'hero' to

Desert Storm because the war took so little time. Perhaps, heroes were not wanted

because they might reopen the discussion about the role of war in societal institutions.

The idea that war makes men, when it is no longer clear what a 'man' is, was

problematic, especially since this was the first twentieth century war to include women

in the American military. This was also the first war that was fought solely by a

volunteer army. There was understandable concern about these new changes in the

military. The short duration of the war meant that those awkward questions did not

need to be asked. Certainly, some heroic actions took place, but there was no way that a

full-fledged hero could be discovered. (Remember the distinction between momentary

heroes and *heroes*.)

By the turn of the century, the idea of the 'hero' had resettled more firmly into

the four categories. Traditional heroes were being divided among the categories.

Modern day heroes were found everywhere. Although social redefinitions were still

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48. Schuman and Rieger, "Historical Analogies, Generational Effects, and Attitudes towards War," pages 317-18

underway, they upset daily life less. Then, the attacks on September 11, 2001 occurred and some controversial questions resurfaced.

The attacks on September 11 were more traumatic because of the heroism applied to the event. *All* of the victims were promoted to hero. This was the first major external attack the US had suffered on home soil for two centuries. The sudden vulnerability was jarring. Most of those killed were civilians and public servants, two demographics war is supposed to avoid. They were innocents indiscriminately targets by terrorists. The randomness of the violence produced increased victimization and thus increased heroism. No one expected to face violent death by boarding airplanes or going to work. The emergency response teams perhaps expected some danger, but certainly not the total collapse of the towers. The only group not completely victimized was Flight 93. The passengers were still killed, but they managed to regain control of the plane and crash it someplace harmless. They performed bravely, effectively, and self-sacrificially for the greater good: the fundament basis of the hero.

The deaths of 9-11 bring to light an important aspect on the nature of heroism. Heroic death makes a complete hero. A dead hero does not have the opportunity to tarnish his reputation with further actions. His death serves as a final redemptive act and so most prior sins are completely forgiven. Finally, the imagery of the fallen hero is very powerful. He is gone for good, except his lingering influence in the public consciousness. Thus, people work to memorialize and immortalize him there. That loss is why there are so many war heroes, cancer patient heroes, and victim heroes—and the masses of works that arise around them. For instance, the HIV/AIDS subculture has

spawned a sense of tragic solidarity cemented by plays and books that emphasize the ongoing struggle. Such works ensure that more of the general public hears about the subculture and remember it. Death, however sanitized or ignored, has lasting impact on those who remain. Their active remembrance is the only way that dead heroes survive.

With the rise of terrorism as the dominant world crisis, everyone has become a potential victim. There were inklings of the democratic victim in the Cold War, but the outbreak of nuclear war would have destroyed everyone. Terrorism only kills a few, but encourages prolonged fear. Every individual is a potential target, which is scarier than total annihilation. Lost family members are unimportant if one is dead as well. Terrorism has to be combated at two levels: the state and the general population. The Afghan invasion and increased homeland security was the government's response. The general population has to fight terrorism by continuing its daily routine. The democratic hero, which applies to everyone in a war setting, then means that everyone is a hero just for continuing normal life. But if everyone is a hero, then is anyone?

The modification of the modern day hero has thus been two-fold. War has been made deplorable and has simultaneously been spread to every element of society. Soldiers are carefully respected, but war itself is no longer the catalyst for manhood or glory. Involvement in war can see heroic performance, but the association with war almost negates the potential for more than momentary heroics. From the other direction, the battlefield of terrorism is everywhere, so everyone can be a participant, willing or not. War cannot be a singular and distinctive experience if everyone is

involved. Every civilization needs heroes and so present day America has had to find new heroes. One does not have to be a soldier to be a hero, but perhaps one has to be a warrior. The hero rhetoric remains entrenched in war terminology: 'fighting' against illness or inequality, 'pioneering' new frontiers in science or sociology, and 'defending' against tyranny and oppression. All heroes, regardless of the move away from the military, have some warrior-elements attached to them.

The September 11 attacks inspired a national desire for action. Afghanistan, stronghold country for the perpetrators of the attacks, was invaded. The invasion served a dual purpose: it moved the battlefield to another country and allowed for some hope of retaliation. This was the start of the 'War on Terrorism,' which the US tried to market to the international community. It worked somewhat and numerous countries sent small forces to aid the original invasion. With legitimacy added by the UN's involvement, the war could be presented as more than a retaliatory attack. With the Second World War and the Vietnam War in mind, the rhetoric surrounding the conflict was careful. It was initially a 'moral war.' Initial impetus was based on the modern Pearl Harbor equivalent and the enemy was undeniably 'bad' given their terrorist status. Having learned something about guerrilla-type warfare that hides amongst the population, this war placed heavy emphasis on 'winning the hearts and minds' of the people. But as the war wore on, it was increasingly bogged down, this

time in sand instead of jungle. US involvement in Afghanistan was starting to resemble

South Vietnam[49].

Then, the American government decided to use the momentum it had generated

and invade Iraq. This move is still contested, but the fact remains that the public

justifications for the invasion turned out to be nonexistent: there were no nuclear

weapons in the country and the alleged Taliban connections were miniscule at best[50].

Additionally, this was the first time the US was involved in two separate wars

simultaneously.* They were grouped and spoken of together, but they were in fact

different conflicts, with different motivations, goals, and fighting styles.

Despite the assurances emerging from the first Gulf War that the 'Vietnam

Syndrome' had been overcome, it was still very present during the second one. The

'Vietnam Syndrome' defies easy definition, but includes a gripping fear about

prolonged US military involvement. American wastage for unclear objectives and often

temporary results were a terrifying outcome that the US hoped to avoid. The crusading

nature of earlier wars had become ineffectual and detrimental with the Vietnam War,

but the US was still keen on the idea of being the world's peace-keeper and democratic

flag bearer. Such a mission invoked similar overtones of superiority that had

contributed to the Vietnam debacle. The rhetoric indicated that the Afghanis and Iraqis

needed American intervention to advance to republican statehood. Although

49. O'Keefe, "Bush Accepts Iraq-Vietnam Comparison"
50. CNN, "Report: No WMD stockpiles in Iraq"
* In the case of the Second World War, the US was fighting on two fronts, not two wars. The
   Japanese and Germans were allies and officially it was all one massive war.

attempting to build a nation had been the downfall of Vietnam involvement, it was precisely that type of goal that dominated the Iraq and Afghanistan war efforts.

Such a patriarchal mindset reinforced elements of warfare that feminism had been working to negate. The Vietnam War had arguably been the most machismo war: the opponents were an 'other' frequently feminized, the attitudes and actions of the military were hypermasculine, and there was a definite division between 'male' and 'female'[51]. Earlier wars had seen the opponents as mostly equals. In the Great War, the Europeans were too similar physically to be likened to women; they could be confused or misguided, but were still equal opponents. That trend continued into the Second World War in the European Theatre. In the Pacific Theatre, the Japanese were too fierce to be effeminized beyond their stature; they were smaller, but fought too well for much gender degrading. They were still an 'other' but a scary one. In the case of the Vietnam War, the enemy's underhanded tactics and widespread use of women and children worked against any hope of a masculine image. Perhaps the most detrimental gender bias was about the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, who were supposed the native allies of the US. Many American soldiers developed images of a weak, unmotivated, and occasionally treacherous force, made all the worse by the fact that the war was theoretically going to be in their control. Along with the changing definitions of feminism at home and unequal forces in the field, the military remained adamant in the stance that they were the only purely manly institution left. By the Iraq and

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51. Stur covers the tensions of perceived and expected gender divisions in her book, Beyond Combat.

Afghanistan wars, women were allowed into the military, but restricted from combat roles. Their role in war is still undergoing redefining as limitations and values are tested.

The contemporary wars are not the Vietnam War, but they remain heavily committed to proving their difference. Measurements of success were required from the beginning, though misleading ones were chosen. The government worked hard to prove its loyalty to the country by claiming and seeking public support. Air power theorists needed to prove their validity, so there was a heavy focus on the precision bombings. (It helped that the war was in a foreign country with little internet access.) Perhaps most importantly, there has been a conscious effort to ensure that soldiers were respected. The country recognized, to some extent, that blaming soldiers for the war was ineffectual and counterproductive.

A lot of care was taken to ensure that soldiers were considered 'not-bad.' They did not have to be 'good' because they were in war, where killing is the primary objective, but they were not 'bad' for participating. Serving the country, doing one's duty, and showing courage in the face of adversary were very forcefully established as 'not-bad.' Poor operational decisions were not the soldiers' faults either. As long as they refrained from mistreating civilians or prisoners of war, there were no issues with the soldiers themselves. Being against the war no longer means being against the soldiers who fight it. This delicate treatment was a far cry from any of the previous wars. In World War II, the public consensus was that soldiers were admirable and

good. In the Vietnam War, the lasting popular culture was soldiers as baby-killers who deserved to be spit on.

The callousness of the Vietnam War has swung in the opposite direction today. Careful attention is given to soldiers by the public. Although both wars expected their veterans to become broken victims, the circumstances create a paradox for the military. Even though the draft is gone and all soldiers now volunteer, there lingers a notion of confused, misled young men forced into an awful situation against their will. The life of a soldier is more transparent and available than ever before, yet there is stubborn refusal to believe that anyone would still volunteer. There is a movement to discredit any use of arms. War is so abhorrent that it is assumed all soldiers will return with a lot of issues. The idea of the 'one-kill' is still present: soldiers are permanently damaged, so if they kill one person after returning home, it is because of the war and they should get some 'help' and be sent on their way without fear of further repercussions.

In fact, every problem the soldier suffers is blamed on 'war.' Agent Orange, the hated chemical of the Vietnam War has been blamed for almost every health problem that exists. Since the veterans of that war are in their fifties and older, it makes a lot of sense that a wide range of ailments have affected them. Does it seem likely that a current case of cancer was caused by Agent Orange? Not so much—it seems borderline absurd that it had lain stagnant for three decades and is suddenly affecting someone who is eighty[52]. Since soldiers served their country, is felt by some that they deserve total compensation from it. There is a definite sense of entitlement to health care that

52. Stolen Valor by Burkett and Whitley proposes and expands on this hypothesis

extends beyond compensation for combat. In the case of today's wars, the traditional vices of alcohol, drugs, and adrenaline are blamed on war. There is some truth to the idea that the war exasperated these problems, either as a way to negate stress or because they were easily available. But the fact that soldiers were people, who had their own issues, before joining is often overlooked. The idea of victimization makes itself known again.

So where do today's heroes exist? In war, there has been careful selection, but some of the old victimization tropes have shown themselves again. To some extent, the idea of the citizen-soldier has gained ground again. The present day soldier is arguably more of a professional than the WWII soldier, but still has firm roots in society. There is no fear that of the military disconnecting from the country completely, because the soldiers are still an inherent part of it. The mating of the victim and the citizen-soldier tropes has been decidedly strange. Local heroes have become the prevalent type. For each state or city or township, there is a list of heroes from the war. Every soldier death results in public ceremonies of some sort. Troops returning home are given celebrations. Yet a sense of fear and concern seems to pervade all of these measures. It almost seems like people are saying "OK, you potential killer, here are your celebrations. We do like you. Don't go crazy and kill everything, alright?" For dead soldiers, there is some relief that 'they've gone to a better place that wasn't here where they could cause trouble.' Dead soldiers are much easier to handle because only positive things about them have to be remembered and there is no chance they will ruin their reputation. Their death redeemed them and kept them clean.

Interactions are different when heroes are family or friends. Since there are personal connections with this type of hero, they do not have to maintain a perfectly clear record. For the public hero, however, misdemeanors are incredibly detrimental. But for the intimate hero, there is a chance for redemption. Little acts, that the public could never witness, solidify this type of hero for close relations. Acts like reading to the children at bedtime are not considered a heroic trait, but it matters to that family. It makes Dad more than a war hero. Dad gets to be a hero because he fought in war, he came back, and he is a good father. Public recognition is fleeting, but close ties of that sort last for entire lifetimes. (The social hero also works to increase the heroism of parenthood, although it receives far less attention than other tropes.)

The issue of continued honor is perhaps the main problem for heroes today. It is easier for local heroes to retain their status because their actions are under continued inspection. Not everyone will remain heroic, but there is more potential because the little acts will mean something. For major public figures though, the fame usually brings about their downfall from hero. Michael Phelps, the 2008 Olympic gold-medal-winning swimmer, was very harshly criticized when caught smoking marijuana[53]. His smoking choice had nothing to do with his Olympic victories, but he was derided harshly regardless. Since the modern day hero is based on personalities and characteristics, dishonorable acts whittle away at the hero status. Heroes have to be heroic in their entire being, not just have performed heroic acts. Thus, most full heroes are found in the mythic realm, where they can always behave properly.

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53. Foxnews.com, "Phelps: Marijuana Scandal"

The media remains a powerful force in this war. It helps dictate who becomes a national hero and is often the influence that removes that title as well. The media in the Vietnam War portrayed all soldiers as fundamentally the same. In the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, the soldier is individualized. Ironically, this media grouping is the opposite of military groupings. In the Vietnam War, soldiers were replaced on an individual basis, which discouraged close ties in units. In the present wars, entire units are deployed and return together. But in the media, the Vietnam War saw collective atrocities and the present wars see individual breakdowns. The My Lai Massacre was assigned collective blame—the entire military and government system was responsible. Comparatively, the recent killing of seventeen Afghani civilians by an American Staff Sergeant has portrayed him as the single target; he acted alone and is now standing trial alone[54]. Although this isolation is intended to curtail the collective loss of heroism, it reflects poorly on the military institution. Since the modern hero needs a clean record and the military is portrayed increasingly poorly, it is becoming impossible for a full hero to be a part of the military.

There is one final issue about dealing with the current wars, especially for people younger than thirty. All of the other wars discussed are history. But for this younger demographic, this is the only war they have lived through or been old enough to understand. They do not have the experience of living through the Vietnam War or World War II, and each generation always handles its wars differently. For everyone,

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54. Popovich, "Can Robert Bales use PTSD as His Legal Defense?" and Nadem and Haroon, "Sixteen Afghan civilians killed in rogue US Attack"

this war is still too close to be able to objectively analyze it and there is still a long time before a cohesive scholarship about it will coalesce. Heroes are always easier from a distance.

Heroes are closer than ever thanks to the increase in media. Media has been intricately tied with the 'hero' since its conception. The hero is created and continued by his fans. Alone, actions are important, but it requires propagation and commemoration for the title of 'hero' to come into play. Before the advent of film, television, or the internet, there was the written word. Custer's Last Stand is immortalized because so much was written on it. Other last stands have faded into obscurity because they were never recorded. Heroes only exist because their exploits are recorded for posterity and spread as much as possible. Achilles and Odysseus are so well known because their adventures have been recorded and distributed.

At the start of the twentieth century, film was beginning to gain popularity. Before, the printing press had been the main media outlet. Newspapers, books, and pamphlets all contributed to what information was passed, and which people became heroes. With the end of the twentieth century, news, stories, and other information is spread through media outlets like television, movies, radio, and the internet. The internet, especially, allows for instant information on just about any subject conceivable. As such, there is a lot more material circulating for people to find. Like the Mister Rogers rumors, some of the stories spread are false. Others, like the videos from Iraq about controversial matters (like soldiers urinating on corpses), have spread harmful or malicious, yet true information. Then of course, there are the inspiring or commonplace

or extraordinary actions that are spread. The speed of this information dissemination is remarkable, but occasionally it leads to debates about security by secrecy or assumptions made without proper context. That alacrity is a major factor of modern life and people are only beginning to recognize how it affects social institutions, like heroism. Instead of a soldier writing a memoir years from now, some have taking to blogging—essentially public journaling online. The immediacy affects what is shared and with whom. In some ways, the 'hero' is closer to the common person than ever before. Soldiers can video-chat or email or call their relations still in the States, decidedly faster communication than letter writing. The 'citizen-soldier' is arguably more of a citizen than ever before.

As for heroes, faster media sources have ensured that more people are recognized for their momentary heroism, but that fewer full heroes exist. Heroic actions and deeds are more easily promoted and shown, but that only creates heroic situations that do not elevate people into 'hero' status. These good stories spread quickly, but so does news about a person's flaws or misdeeds. Thus, most instances of heroics involve either an antihero or a momentary hero who returns to the ranks of normal humanity quickly. An example is the woman who threw her heels off to catch a falling baby[55]. She was appropriately lauded for her heroic action, but has since faded into the obscurity of the masses.

War is not an ignorable event. Although the recent wars rarely make front page news, they remain a constant presence for the country. These wars have been

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55. Associated Press, "Woman Catches Toddler After 10-Story Fall Reports Claim"

downplayed in the media, partially because of the recent reviling of war . It seems as though the cynicism of the Cold War Era and the self-centered greed of capitalism has combined with the desire for nonviolence and notions of feminism to create this rift between past feelings towards war and modern day ones. War is no longer a vehicle for a glorious or necessary cause. The ugly side of war has been known from the start, but it seems that only in the last few decades does it outweigh the perceived positives of war. The individual is considered more important than ever and the morality of self-preservation has increased since the Second World War.[56] That, coupled with the mistrust of the government, has made the honor of duty to the country seem pedantic and antiquated. There has also been a huge uprising in the last half century against violence. Fighting in schools is heavily punished, wrestling is just a performance, and the notion of violent self-defense is contested. For some reason, violence, like sex, has been deemed too 'animalistic' for human sensibilities. Instead of channeling natural urges into productive routes, people in America are taught to repress them and treat them as taboo. Partially, the blurring of the gender-binary model has contributed to the distaste of violence. Since it has always been grouped under the 'masculine' heading, to some feminists, that means that it is inherently wrong and should be stopped. Although few people come out and bluntly say as much, the discrimination against violence in general has been growing.

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56. The novel <u>Catch 22</u> by Joseph Heller illustrates this shift as well as any other source

Even with the current ambiguous public feelings towards the military, the Medal of Honor has remained a hallmark of valor and heroism. In the military it is the most prestigious award and strenuous efforts have been made to ensure its reputation. The awarding of the Medal of Honor is based entirely on heroic actions. Said actions fall into two categories: soldier-saving and war-winning[57]. Each branch has developed their own version of the Medal, which can result in rare double-awards for the same action. Originally instituted in the Civil War, the Medal of Honor was retrofitted in the First World War to raise its prestige, including requiring actual combat with an enemy. Many former recipients found their medals rescinded. Since then, awarding of the Medal of Honor has been a closely regulated affair[58].

The awarding of the Medal of Honor reflects contemporary sentiment. Only one woman has ever received the award. Mary Walker provided medical services in the Civil War and was awarded the Medal of Honor because she was ineligible for any other award. In 1916 it was rescinded, and not returned until 1977, to continued debate[59]. In the nineteenth century, minorities also received the Medal: some Apache scouts and Buffalo Soldiers (the all-black regiments) received the medal during the Indian Wars[60]. As racism increased in intensity and scale in the early twentieth century, fewer minorities received the award, despite their distinguished service in all the major wars. The Second World War was arguably the worst conflict concerning exclusion

57. *The Medal of Honor, Combat Orientations and Latent Role Structure in the United States Military* by Joseph Blake and Suellen Butler elaborated on these two categories
58. Durkota and Boston Publishing Company Editors
59. Boston Publishing Company Editors, *Above and Beyond,* pages 38-39
60. Ibid., pages 81 and 85

despite participation. The commissions established in the nineties to address inequality reflected the unapologetic-apologies that showed the general desire for subtle reparations. In the case of the modern wars, the requirements have been raised, resulting in fewer recipients. The general aversion to thinking about the wars has lessened celebratory practices, like awarding medals.

The Afghanistan and Iraq Wars have only had ten Medal of Honor recipients. Considering the lengthy duration of the wars, this number is quite low compared to other major US conflicts. A central observation about all ten is that they were soldier-saving. Four involved covering grenades or throwing them out of range. Four more were awarded for moving into dangerous positions to provide cover fire. The last two focused on rescuing fellow soldiers by getting them to safer positions[61]. This trend reflects both the nature of counterinsurgency wars and the change in public feelings towards war. Counterinsurgency wars necessitate prolonged threats to civilians. Danger to civilians and intentional acts of violence do not fit into the feminized, postmodern self-image of the US.

It is hardly surprising that defining heroes, even in the traditional breeding ground of the military, has become so difficult. The monumental changes of the last fifty year have left the US attempting to redefine a national identity. The military-underwritten, world-policing superpower is obsolete, but a replacement unifying cause has yet to appear. With new standards and values, the country is left reevaluating what came before and what may come next. The traditional hero and rogue tropes sufficed

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61. "Medal of Honor Recipients – Iraq" and "Medal of Honor Recipients – Afghanistan"

before the tumultuous second half of the twentieth century. Altered social norms,

power limitations, and information gathering systems all affected the possibilities of

heroism. The hero has settled into the four categories of antihero, action, social, and

mythic, but even these suffer from broad generalization. Specific requirements are

nonexistent, because there are no cohesive definitions of what a hero should be or do.

In a context of multicultural empathy where everyone has a valid voice, a consistent

national opinion is near impossible. The hero is still a vital part of any community, but

his identity is still being determined.

The confusion in defining heroism is perhaps best shown by a proposed medal in

2010. The NATO Commander of troops in southern Afghanistan, Maj. Gen. Nick

Carter, proposed a medal for 'courageous restraint.' Instead of the soldier-saving or

war-winning precedents for war medals, this medal would be awarded for *not shooting*.

According to Lt. Col. Tadd Sholtis,

> Our young men and women display remarkable courage every day,
> including situations where they refrain from using lethal force, even at
> risk to themselves, in order to prevent possible harm to civilians. In some
> situations our forces face…that restraint is an act of discipline and courage
> not much different than those seen in combat actions that merit awards for
> valor…We absolutely support the right of our forces to defend
> themselves. Valuing restraint in a potentially dangerous situation is not
> the same thing as denying troops the right to employ lethal force when
> they determine that it is necessary[62].

Numerous debates flared up around this proposal and it was ultimately abandoned.

While not exactly discouraging defense, the medal does acutely reflect the move away

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62. McMichael, "Hold Fire, Earn a Medal," and Starr, "Military proposes medal for troops
showing restraint."

from violence as a valid action, even in a war setting. The fact that this proposal could be seriously suggested highlights the recent and drastic changes in public sentiment of the last fifty years.

In a world of counterinsurgency, how are we going to redefine heroes? The answer remains opaque.

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