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Moving Towards Positive Depictions of War Induced PTSD

Contemporary popular culture tends to glorify war and ignore the mental health traumas that soldiers face when coming home. For many veterans, a second battle begins as they go back to civilian life, and for some it can be more challenging than being deployed. Most of our conceptions of war come from how it's defined in pop culture. Nations decorate their war veterans as heroes, Hollywood producers show glorified soldiers that win against all odds, and video games like *Call of Duty* depict war as inconsequential, thrilling, and fun. These depictions omit and ignore the long term psychological damages that soldiers must manage, like PTSD. PTSD is a leading mental health condition that soldiers are affected by during and after deployment. It tends to manifest itself mildly but can be severe and extremely debilitating for some individuals, leaving them with work or sleep problems (McNulty). For some, PTSD symptoms improve, but for others, it is a lifelong condition that is a true disability and for which benefits are available. This reality never quite makes it to pop culture's depictions of war, which distorts how soldiers and the public perceive the seriousness of PTSD and the services we make available to treat it.

Understanding this is important because media portrayals of soldiers have a powerful effect on how veterans are perceived. Studying misconceptions helps shed light on the real costs of war, the ways we can better help veterans, and how we can better treat PTSD as a condition. *American Sniper* fits into this as a recent war film that portrays PTSD in a nuanced and accurate

way. As a biographical film, its depiction of the protagonist Chris Kyle sets itself apart from other war movies by giving a detailed glimpse at the reintegration process and the realities for soldiers and their families as they recover. It sets a standard for other depictions in pop culture and I will be explaining its significance. My essay will prove that Portrayals of war in pop culture are misleading and negatively influence the ways the public perceives veterans with mental health conditions. These depictions need change to improve the health and reintegration experiences of veterans returning from combat. I will show how *American Sniper* makes headway towards this goal through its accurate and nuanced depiction of postwar reintegration. *American Sniper* is unique because it is not primarily a film about mental health. It is in every way a true war movie, with the gore and explosions that keep audiences on edge. Even with these, it finds time to positively show mental health with a realistic timeline and a nuanced portrayal that positively impacts audiences. I'll begin by leveraging Maseda's paper to explain how portrayals of war in pop culture omit and misrepresent PTSD as a condition, then I'll use Vassar and Libermann's papers to show how this twists the public's perception about the condition's seriousness, as well as its treatability. The next part of my paper will use Freyes, Fisher, and Vassar to show how Pop culture's negative impact on PTSD can be ameliorated by including PTSD in war stories and by showing available mental health resources to normalize recovery. The mentioned sources and others will set the stage to show how *American Sniper* fulfills these and goes even further with its nuanced and detailed depiction of PTSD.

Portrayals of war in pop culture omit and misrepresent PTSD as a condition, which negatively influences veterans and the public about the condition's seriousness as well as its treatability. Pop culture depictions of war tend to ignore or misrepresent mental health conditions because they are less entertaining. The most common way pop culture misrepresents PTSD is by

ignoring the condition and not letting it have a spot in public discourse. To get the obvious out of the way, it must be said that PTSD generally does not lend itself well for the big screens. From the perspective of the entertainment industry, eye catchy explosions and tense combat scenes are more interesting and get more views than showing vets at PTSD counseling. The reality is that depicting PTSD, especially in an honest and informative way, is not normally something that sells in Hollywood or that gets views on social media. This limitation is important to keep in mind, as it gives context as to why war depictions are so common and yet why PTSD depictions of veterans are not.

The slow pace at which PTSD has entered public discourse and been recognized and researched by the academic community has contributed to pop culture depictions ignoring or misrepresenting the condition. Outside of the incentives Hollywood producers have to ignore PTSD in favor of other more intense, or visually pleasing elements of war, the portrayal of vets with the condition has been influenced by the slow pace at which PTSD has entered public discourse. As is explained by Maseda, PTSD was only officially recognized in 1980, which is significant because this is extremely late. It is well known that other conditions ranging from schizophrenia, autism, or bipolar disorder were discovered much earlier in the 19th and early 20th centuries, several decades or even over a century before PTSD. Worse is that the condition has surely affected those exposed to war traumas for thousands of years, and even worse is that it seems pop culture has identified the condition before researchers have, with the existence of nicknames for PTSD like “nostalgia” during the civil war, “battle neurosis” during WWI, and “shell shock” during WWII (3). This means that the vast majority of American combat veterans were deployed before the condition was understood, and it also means that pop culture depictions of PTSD have existed long before any research was available (see graphic on page 13). Although

there are reasons for this, politically and otherwise, it is clear that this has had an effect on how war induced PTSD has been portrayed in pop culture. As Maseda explains, “Hollywood movies prior to 1970 portrayed earlier wars’ veterans mainly with physical problems” and “their physical problems ‘overshadowed the usually more subtle and secondary psychological issues’” (6). Even when mental health conditions were shown, they tended to be tamed, where soldiers shown in films “either didn’t suffer from serious psychological problems or, if they did, their problems were ameliorated by a warm homecoming” (7). Put simply, pop culture depictions throughout the 20th century have turned a blind eye to how veterans are impacted by mental health conditions. Most depictions focus on physical ailments, and those that show mental health conditions show them as an afterthought. This can be attributed to the very late recognition and research, since it cannot be expressed how late the year 1980 is to officially recognize such a significant condition. This has forced PTSD into the back seat in our depictions of war, which ultimately stigmatizes the condition and downplays how serious and widespread it is.

The obscurity around PTSD has factored in pop culture’s misrepresentations of the condition through stereotypes and sensationalized character development. The extremely late recognition for PTSD has created a void which pop culture has creatively filled with entertainment and sensationalism. One of the common ways this happens is with blatantly incorrect symptom portrayals. As Maseda explains: soldiers were “sometimes portrayed as suffering from catatonia following a traumatic battle, which is a highly unusual response to psychological trauma” (6). Beyond incorrect symptom depictions, Maseda explains the trend in pop culture to show the “intolerance and hardship of military culture towards psychological breakdowns” (7). This has connoted PTSD to weakness, which undermines vets and the condition. Potentially worse, as Maseda explains, are the fixations of Hollywood producers to

create deranged or violent characters, and how producers have leveraged the returning war veteran as a stereotype to achieve this (12). Cheaply produced, sensational films like Born Losers (1967), Angels From Hell (1968), and Chrome and Hot Leather (1971) showed drugs, violence, and chaos by representing veterans as psychotic, gun-crazed loners" (10). These pumped up versions of PTSD ridicule its seriousness and make it hard for the public to understand it truthfully. This is a big deal, because as Vassar explains in his study, "It is known that distorted images of mental health in the media …can lead to misinformation" (qtd. in Vassar 579). It is clear that the associations to weakness and to psychotic, dehumanized characters are distorted and do in fact mislead the public. This brief history is important to keep in mind, because it gives context as to why pop culture has been so poor at showing mental health conditions associated with war.

In sum, pop culture depictions of war tend to ignore or misrepresent mental health conditions because they are less entertaining and because of the slow pace at which PTSD has been recognized and researched by the academic community. Pop culture went first, with decades of misrepresentations through stereotypes and sensationalized character development which has spread misinformation. The result of this is that PTSD is downplayed, and the public is kept in the dark, which ultimately harms vets and their outcomes.

Pop culture's negative impact on PTSD can be ameliorated by including PTSD in war stories and by showing available mental health resources to normalize recovery, to inform the public about the condition, and to raise awareness about treatment choices. The entertainment industry negatively influences the public about vets with mental health conditions but is in a strong position to make a difference. A very small percentage of voting Americans are war veterans, and even fewer are geared to understand PTSD in its fullness. Many people's grasp on

PTSD is shaped by pop culture and by social media. In the self-reported section in Libermann's survey, it was found that "nearly half the population reports that the entertainment industry has a very big impact on the way people perceive veterans (6). Somewhat alarmingly, the survey results showed "Americans believe that veterans are more likely to carry negative attributes than an average civilian, in opposition to reality" and that "the biggest misconception comes on the issue of mental health–more than 8 in 10 believe post 9/11 veterans are more likely to suffer from mental health issues than a comparable civilian (4). To tie these findings together, the survey found that pop culture is highly influential on our views of veterans, that generally, the public thinks veterans are portrayed more negatively than positively (6). These findings show that the public makes a lot of poor assumptions about vets and holds the entertainment industry accountable. The alarming rates at which the public associates veterans with mental health conditions is strong evidence that pop culture portrayals could do better.

PTSD needs to be a bigger part of how we tell war stories so that the public is better informed about the condition, its symptoms, and its seriousness. As explained, media portrayals have a tremendous impact on how the veterans and the public perceive mental health, and PTSD needs to be included in the conversation. As Vassar explains in his study, PTSD is common and widespread, with "approximately 11% to 20% of veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, 12% who served in the gulf war, and 15% who served in the vietnam war have been diagnosed with PTSD" (579). These are big proportions of our veterans, especially considering the high number of vets who are potentially undiagnosed. Despite how common the condition is, it is clear there is a void in the public's understanding of it. Vets in the VA network who were surveyed in Fisher said they wished PTSD was more talked about:

> "Veterans … focused most heavily on getting information about PTSD to their family members. Comments like this one from a male veteran were common: 'Pretty Much everybody needs to understand what PTSD is....You Gotta understand it in order to help.'" (Fischer 190)

Vets were not the only ones who wished there was more awareness about the condition. Family members who were surveyed explained what they too wished they had known more:

> The fiancé of one veteran said, "I wish I would have known what PTSD was....For a long period of time I thought that was an excuse he was using, you know, not to do things."
>
> The cousin of another veteran remarked that ". . . the kids....need some education on it....someone else to tell the symptoms and tell, you know, what could happen and how to deal with it."

These scenarios show that there is a lack of PTSD awareness both within the military and in the public. As this makes evident, PTSD needs to be a part of how we think of war, and simply choosing to include PTSD in pop culture would have a positive effect on reintegration experiences. Recovering from PTSD involves tremendous change which can be overbearing and made worse by vets and family members who don't understand or don't take the condition seriously. For the benefit of our vets, pop culture needs to normalize PTSD as a war injury the same way we do physical ailments.

Pop culture depictions of PTSD should show available mental health resources to normalize PTSD recovery and raise awareness about treatment choices for vets and their families. Pop culture depictions of war very sparingly show veterans with PTSD seeking help. In the study conducted by Vassar on 50 popular war films, only 1 was found to show a vet getting help for his condition (579). This frames the condition as an afterthought, and this is a big deal

because as established, media portrayals of soldiers with mental health conditions have a big impact on how veterans and the public perceive those conditions. By ignoring PTSD recovery, media portrayals limit how people perceive the condition and the resources available for it. Academia has found that leveraging resources and seeking professional help is important for successful recoveries. As established in Freyes et Al: “To some extent, several couples credited their outcomes to the help or guidance received from professional sources. The only regret some expressed was not seeking help sooner” (153). A lot of vets don’t find this help sooner because they don’t know about the resources available to help them. In *American Sniper*, Chris Kyle finds the recovery group as a last resort when a doctor shows him where it is. Studies echo this and show that vets wished they knew more about treatment options and support networks. According to the Fisher study, “About a third of veterans also expressed a desire for information about current VA services and benefits, as well as how VA healthcare programs operate and communicate internally: “It’s like you need a PhD in just Veterans Affairs [to figure out what services are available]....every time you look around, it’s like we used to do, oh, no, it’s not like that now’” (190). More focus should also be paid to resources available to the family members of veterans that have PTSD. As is explained in Fisher, VA resources should expand resources for family members and children: “The need for skills training to help families living with a person with PTSD was mentioned most frequently by both veterans and family members” (Fisher 190). Receiving care greatly benefits outcomes and receiving care depends on the attitudes and perceptions vets have about care. Pop culture depictions of war, whether they be movies, tv shows, or posts on social media, are in a unique place to make a difference.

American Sniper's nuanced and detailed depiction of PTSD makes great headway towards more honest and neutral portrayals of mental health. Future war films should take note.

American Sniper accurately depicts PTSD symptoms and how they impact members of a veteran's family during reintegration. As a biographical film, it goes into more detail about the reintegration process. The lengthy part about Chris Kyle's reintegration experience featured scenes that felt uncomfortably real and which research confirms are accurate. According to the APA, "PTS symptoms are divided into four clusters—intrusive recollections, avoidance, negative alterations in cognitions/mood, and arousal—and include features such as emotion dysregulation, anger/irritability, and difficulty sleeping (qtd. in Bennet 136). *American Sniper* makes sure to depict all of these clusters. Intrusive recollections are portrayed when Kyle stares at a blank TV in the living room, while explosions and gunfire is played in the background. Common avoidance symptoms are portrayed in several scenes when his wife Taya tries to talk to him, and he sits unresponsive and ignores her. Symptoms of negative mood swings are portrayed in the hospital scene, where Kyle is unreasonably panicked when seeing his baby daughter crying in hospital. Later on in the film, violent intrusion symptoms are shown during a family BBQ when Kyle misperceives a dog playing with a child, and aggressively hits and threatens the dog, to the horror of his onlooking family. This gives a very real and detailed look at intrusion symptoms and how they can lead to violence. In a study on PTSD symptoms, it was found that intrusion symptoms are the most dangerous and the most correlated to violent crime: "for each one unit increase in severity of intrusion symptoms reported, an individual's likelihood of being charged with a violent crime increases by 7% (139-140). This represents a very realistic look at the diversity of the symptoms and the progression of the condition. *American Sniper* shows reintegration and the costs of war in the most adulterated way. It's important that future depictions take note of this so the public understands that the condition is true and serious.

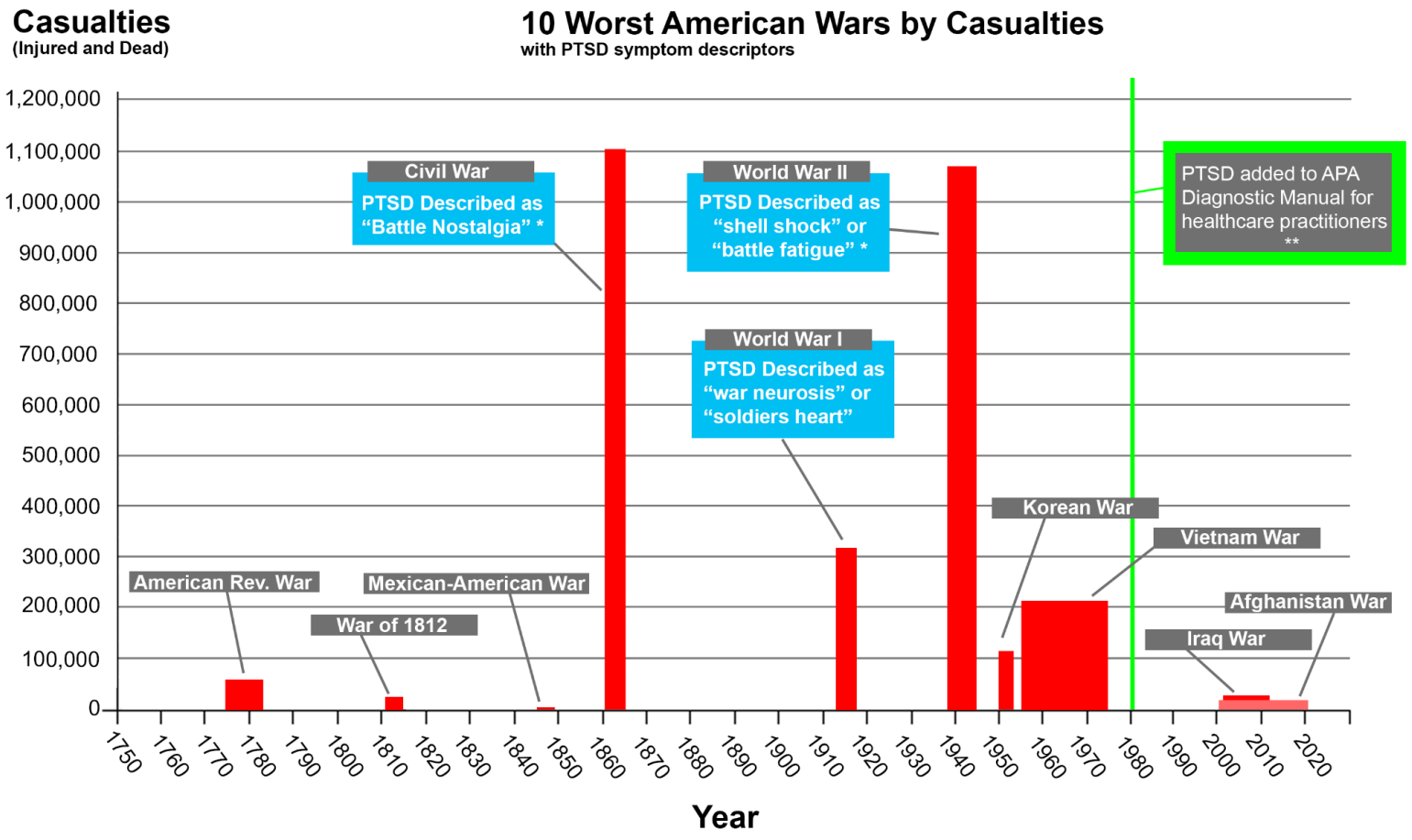
American Sniper sticks true to reality by depicting veterans' self perception as an obstacle to recovery and those around them as influencers to getting help. In the film, Kyle is portrayed as not accepting the seriousness of his mental health situation. He pretends he is fine, he tells the doctors he rationalizes the atrocities he saw on the battlefield, and he does not seek help until it is clear there is no other choice. Academics who have analyzed reintegration experiences have noted that this is very common: "Many who suffer from mental health problems do not perceive a need for help (18,22), and others grapple with uncertainty about whether their distress is severe enough to warrant it (26)" (Spoont, 660-661). Moreover, the film makes sure to to depict the role of Kyle's physician at the hospital in introducing him to this recovery group, with which he eventually finds purpose and heals. The role his physician plays in the story lines up with real reintegration experiences. The results in the study conducted by Freyes et Al showed that: "All couples had reached out for professional help at some point postdeployment…To some extent, several couples credited their outcomes to the help or guidance received from professional sources. The only regret some expressed was not seeking help sooner" (153). This shows that getting professional help makes a big difference in the outcome, that most couples end up getting professional help, and that many wished they had sought help sooner. This is exactly what *American Sniper* depicts in Chris Kyle, and the fact it depicts it this way goes to show how far ahead the film is in showing the condition. What makes this particularly unique is that *American Sniper* is not primarily a film about mental health. It is a true war movie, with the gore, explosions, and combat scenes that get views, but it also finds the time to show this timeline that is incredibly realistic. For this, other depictions should take note.

American Sniper goes beyond other pop culture depictions of PTSD by depicting the condition in a neutral way and by showing the evolution of the condition over several

deployments. As previously established, the vast majority of war films fall short when it comes to depicting PTSD. Out of those that do show it, many twist or misrepresent the condition for character development, and others depict the condition incorrectly. Not only does *American Sniper* depict it honestly, it also shows the impacts of war on Kyle's mental health over several deployments and reintegration experiences, which gives an unparalleled look at the timeline of Kyle's changing mental health. On his first return, his wife jumps into his arms as he walks off the plane onto the tarmac. The film makes it clear that all is well at first, but this does not last. On a later trip home, it is clear that Kyle is perturbed. He is more disillusioned, stressed, and the film shows his condition deteriorating by showing intrusions like the hospital scene where Kyle becomes unreasonably panicked and starts yelling at hospital staff when he sees his baby crying. On Kyle's last trip home, the reality of his condition is obvious by looking at his relationship with his wife. On Kyle's last trip home, he does not tell his wife he is back, choosing instead to shelter at a bar until she calls him, asking where he is. The point is, no other depictions of PTSD are as detailed when it comes to showing the condition in its entirety, including the onset, the worsening of symptoms, the denial, and eventual recovery with professional help, family dialogue, and new coping mechanisms. What also sets *American Sniper* apart is that it remains neutral in this depiction. This is important because the Leiberman study found that neutral portrayals do as good or better than heroic portrayals of PTSD vets when it comes to shaping public perceptions in a positive way (10). Neutral portrayals are also beneficial because they are a lot more credible and realistic (11). This means that *American Sniper* leads a new wave in PTSD depictions by showing the condition honestly and in its entirety, while also making this nuanced and neutral portrayal stand out within a movie that also has all the classic elements of war like explosions and violence. This benefits vets and the public about what PTSD is like,

what families go through, and why getting help is so important. By depicting the condition this way, *American Sniper* honors vets and others who have struggled with the condition, and makes great headway towards normalizing the condition and portraying it more positively. Other depictions should take note.

In conclusion, portrayals of war in pop culture are misleading and negatively influence the ways the public perceives veterans with mental health conditions. Moving forwards, the mental illnesses associated with combat should be a bigger part of the war stories that are told, and *American Sniper* makes great headway towards this goal. By honoring the condition and showing how brutal it is and how much it saps out of vets and their families, it does justice to them and their struggle, and it helps others by showing the struggle with PTSD is real and they are not alone.



This graphic shows the worst wars by casualties in American history. Casualties can be understood as a measure of soldiers' exposure to war trauma. This graphic draws attention to the fact that the vast majority of American soliders had to deal with PTSD before it was officially recognized in 1980. This gives credence to the fact that pop culture depictions of PTSD existed before we fully understood it, which is reinforced by the pop culture connotations for PTSD symptoms used throughout various war.

* Maseda, Rebeca, and Patrick Dulin. "From Weaklings to Wounded Warriors: The Changing Portrayal of War-Related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in American Cinema." 49th Parallel, Vol. 30, 2012, p. 3.

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