

Constructing the Military Hero

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Abstract: Today we see an increase in the usage of the term hero. Especially in the media, the term is applied not only to those who do specific heroic deeds but to entire professions, e.g., the military. In this paper, we analyze the media's social construction of military heroes with respect to four individuals, two fictional characters and two real people. We argue that four themes are essential to the construction of the military hero whether for fictional or real people: a biography; strength of purpose; gender; and the reinforcement of national values. Once constructed in the media, the hero often contributes to political ends by reinforcing national values. More specifically, in their construction military heroes reflect and reproduce ideologies that legitimate the state and its military aggressiveness.

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The hero is an iconic figure in the popular imagination of most cultures. Indeed, one of the earliest stories in the English language features Beowulf, a warrior hero who slays monsters. Another hero story, one that has been told in many formats, comes from Greek mythology: Jason and his crew of Argonauts embark on a mission for their king, a voyage in search of a golden fleece. During the quest, they also fight monsters. Beowulf, Jason and other legendary heroes frequently are warriors and their exploits often are military in nature.

Scholars have long been interested in this iconic figure and have posed questions such as "who is the hero" or "what makes a hero" both in terms of legendary characters and real people. Joseph Campbell (1949) is a definitive source in these matters, although popular media organizations like The American Film Institute (2003) also weigh in on the heroic qualities of fictional protagonists. Recently, there has been an interesting application of the term "hero." In the aftermath of the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, the term "hero" has been applied not only to real life people who have done heroic deeds, but to members of entire occupations, e.g., soldiers, firefighters, and police officers. They are saluted in daily life, for example, with New York Fire Department (NYFD)

baseball caps, with early boarding privileges at airports, or when military personnel are urged to stand for applause at sporting events.

In any case, the term "hero" seems to enjoy a wider usage today. As Rosa Brooks observes, "in the past a person had to do something truly exceptional to qualify as a full-fledged hero, but today merely being in the Army, especially if you are injured or killed, constitutes heroism" (*LA Times* 8/3/2007).

Whether this expanded usage constitutes a different threshold or merely reflects a shift in the popular imagination, it is a good time to reconsider what it means to be heroic and also the functions of the hero. We are interested in the importance of the media in the social construction of heroes, especially military heroes, and in the recipe for their construction. For our analysis, we consider four military heroes: (1) Comrade Ogilvy in George Orwell's novel, *1984*; (2) U.S. Army PFC Pat Tillman; (3) Old Shoe (Sergeant William Schumann) in the film, *Wag the Dog*; (4) U.S. Army Private Jessica Lynch. We selected these four individuals rather than an entire occupation because they bring into sharp relief the construction and the functions of heroes. They also further our analysis by pairing real people and fictional characters. Two of these heroes are fictional characters (Ogilvy and Old Shoe) and two are real people (Tillman and Lynch), but we argue that there are similarities in the construction and the functions of their hero stories. Because of these similarities, our pairing of real people and fictional, obviously contrived characters reveals the constructed nature of the real hero stories.

We also are interested in how the hero is used to further political ends such as the legitimacy of the state

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and its military aggressiveness. Hero stories reinforce and reproduce dominant ideologies but this is hidden because their stories convey powerful emotions that are couched in symbols and myth. As we expand criminology's intellectual agenda (see Hagan and Greer 2002) more globally, we must understand war and those factors that facilitate it.

SCHOLARSHIP ON HEROES

Scholarship on heroes traditionally focused on mythology. Myth, according to Slotkin (1973:6-7), dramatizes a culture's history and translates its experiences into "a constellation of compelling narratives." Such narratives, whether they reference ancient myths or contemporary superheroes, express a culture's world view and also offer examples of how people should live honorable lives (Williams 2011).

In *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, Otto Rank (1914) addresses important aspects of the mythological hero, especially the hero's early life. This early biography includes a prophecy of the hero's birth, noble or divine parents, and the hero's abandonment of and eventual return to claim his birthright. Rank's formulation is influenced by Freudian theory, for example, in the fantasy that a child is somehow special or of noble lineage, e.g., Harry Potter (Indick 2004).

A second important text, Lord Raglan's (FitzRoy Somerset) *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (1936), focuses on the end of the hero's life. Raglan's analysis is influenced by the idea that myth is a script for religious ritual (Indick 2004). Raglan emphasizes the hero's death and ritualistic transformation into a legend.

Probably the definitive text is Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Drawing on Jungian archetypes, Campbell sees symbols and myths as spontaneous productions of the psyche that carry the human spirit forward. He focuses on the hero's journey, including the call to adventure, challenges the hero endures during the journey, and the hero's return to the everyday world. This structure of analysis has been applied to figures from Jason to Jesus to Bilbo Baggins. Campbell's centrality in the analysis of the hero is due to his scholarship on mythology, but also to his appearance on television. In 1988, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) aired *The Power of Myth*, a six part documentary series in which Campbell was interviewed by Bill Moyers.

The hero in these classic texts often is portrayed as a warrior or a military figure and is usually a man. Scholars see these two features of the hero's representation—a military person and a man—as mutually reinforcing: the military constructs heroes in masculine terms and these, in turn, reify patriarchy and nationalism (Enloe 2000; Privedera and Howard 2006; Kumar 2004). However, Maureen Murdock (1990) argues that this need not be the case. In *The Heroine's Journey*, Murdock modifies the traditional structure of the hero's story to make it relevant to contemporary women. Like Campbell's hero, Murdock's heroine is a warrior who undergoes a journey, but it includes the challenge of integrating her feminine and masculine aspects. The hero must learn to display features typically associated with men heroes, e.g., physical strength and determination, but also those more associated with women, e.g., spiritual balance.

In addition to these gendered differences, scholars diverge on other dimensions of the hero's story. For Campbell (1949), the hero is an archetype, a timeless and universal story that enjoys a cross-cultural validity (see Wahlstrom and Deming 1980). Others see the hero as a culturally specific figure. Lang and Trimble (1988) argue that myths change as culture changes, and Williams (2011) and Degh (1994) agree that hero stories change so as to fit the contemporary society.

However, scholars agree on important aspects of the hero's story. Heroes exhibit traits that the public admires in real people such as courage and self-abnegation, although the hero exceeds the normal standards of behavior. Heroes are us projected outwardly; their stories are our stories, only better (Indick 1994). Locke (1999) argues that television heroines like Xena the Warrior Princess and Buffy the Vampire Slayer are caricatures of the best in us. The American Film Institute (AFI) characterizes the hero as someone who "prevails in extreme circumstances and who dramatizes a sense of morality, courage, and purpose" (2003:1-2). The hero may sacrifice him/herself and by so doing shows humanity at its best. The hero represents the group's "better self" (Klapp 1954). Hero narratives evoke a mythic, sometimes almost religious quality, that generates a collective celebration (for a related, criminological argument, see Klein 2012). The celebration reinforces the collective embodiment of values such as patriotism.

Another point of scholarly agreement, and one that is important here, is that the media are key in the construction of the hero. Of course, hero legends have

always been transmitted through media. Legends like Beowulf were in epic poems, and, centuries later, tales of the old west appeared in "dime novels" (Cawelti 1999). The AFI's interest in the hero reflects a long-standing fascination with the hero in film. Earlier legends were a part of folklore, although Degh (1994) notes that such tales increasingly are mass-marketed stories for a mass society. She suggests that today, the media are the main dispensers of these tales and that television in particular accelerates the folklore process (1994: 36). With respect to political values, Priverda and Howard (2006) note that contemporary media are the ideal site for reproducing national archetypes.

We do not suggest that the public simply accept all of the images that the media disseminate about heroes. The media are not a unified social institution and audiences are not dupes. As Manjoo (2008) notes, especially with political stories people choose which media they use based on matters ranging from personal preference to their politics. We do suggest, however, that hero stories are not so overtly political, at least in terms of political parties. Moreover, with the hero stories that we will be discussing most mainstream media covered the events and, at least early on, in a similar fashion. The media have always seemed to relish hero stories. They contain the elements that make for a good story: conflict; facing and besting challenges; and the frequent binary of good and evil – the good hero is threatened by but defeats villains. This is especially the case when heroes are portrayed as our champions, and even more so during times of crisis (Eldeman, 1988; Altheide, 2002).

To appreciate the media's role in the social construction of heroes, we note that the media exist within a network of social institutions (including government and religion) that disseminate messages that reinforce dominant values (see Barak 1994; Friedrichs 2007). In terms of how this happens, media scholars suggest that journalists are influenced by many factors as they decide what stories to cover and how to cover them (Tuchman 1978). Not surprisingly, the media reveal an eagerness to use the symbolic language that is deployed by the state (Cavender and Jurik 2012). In any case, as the media communicate stories, they reinforce ideological frameworks through which audiences understand stories. More specifically, with respect to whom the public sees as a hero, the media's designation of that status may be as important as whether or not a person actually embodies heroic traits (Klapp 1954: 61).

The observation that tales are mass-marketed and that the media affect the process is an important one: if hero tales are socially constructed and if the media are a part of that process, the media can be used to craft hero stories that appeal to national values. Those who craft a hero story simply have to know the recipe for the construction. George Lucas acknowledged that his *Star Wars* films followed the classical hero mythology set out in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. He consulted Campbell about the hero motifs in these films (Larsen and Larsen, 1991:541). If Lucas can construct a hero tale according to Campbell's mythological motifs, it is reasonable to conclude that others can create such stories as well. Like Lucas, they simply have to know how to construct the story and tailor it to the contemporary context.

One important question is "toward what ends" are hero stories constructed? Referring to a cultural criminology of war more generally (Klein 2012) posits that "military action depends on the partial ideological enlistment of the public." Hero stories help with that effort. Such stories and accompanying narratives, whether oriented to anti-immigration policies or the war on terror, attempt to legitimate the state and its militarism by depicting the hero as the symbolic protector of national values against foreign others that are a threat to those values (see Pickering 2007). We now turn to the themes of the hero story.

HERO THEMES

Our review of the relevant literature suggests that there are four themes that frequently appear in the hero narrative. The four themes that characterize the hero story include: (1) the hero's biography; (2) the hero exhibits a compelling strength of purpose; (3) hero stories often have gendered implications; (4) hero stories reinforce national goals and values. We will elaborate how these themes, which are part of the construction of the hero story, are grounded in the literature.

Heroes come with biographies that locate them within society. They exhibit strength of purpose that is that special X factor that motivates them despite ordeal and challenge. Although many sources equate heroism and masculinity – and three of our heroes are men – the literature suggests that women can also be heroes. Finally, our criterion of national values reflects the idea that heroes also reflect our values, only more so.

Stories often contain a biographical back story of the hero. This theme is consistent with Rank's (1914)

focus on the hero's early life, including a noble lineage, that is, the hero is special from birth. However, Indick (2004) suggests that although mythical heroes were typically of noble lineage (perhaps the offspring of a mortal and a god) U.S. heroes often are of more humble origins. For example, Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* combines both a noble and a humble origin: Luke, the son of a Jedi Knight, is raised by simple folk on an agrarian planet (Hirschman 2000). Similarly, Spider-man's alter-ego, Peter Parker, displays the angst and insecurities of a typical teenager (Adkinson 2008). The importance of a biographical back story is consistent with Degh's (1994) discussion of life histories: life histories are social constructions that include and exclude aspects of a life story. The biographies of fictional characters are obviously constructions, but from this perspective the biographies of real heroes are social constructions as well; they highlight or deemphasize material.

Heroes exhibit dedication or strength of purpose in the pursuit of goals. This dedication may be so strong that they encounter great risk or even sacrifice their lives. This dimension reflects Campbell's (1949) theme of a series of challenges during the hero's journey as well as Raglan's (1936) focus on the hero's transformation into legend. Through the re-telling of exploits, a real person may become a mythical figure and enshrined after death (Klapp, 1954: 59-60). In the film, *Pathfinder* (Caralco Pictures, 1990), a teenage boy, Aigin, saves his community from marauders who have brutally murdered his family. Aigin is forced to lead the killers, but leads them away from the community, and eventually tricks them into walking off of a steep cliff. During his perilous journey, Aigin grows as a person; he exhibits bravery and learns wisdom. Upon his return, the community makes him their leader. *Pathfinder*, which is based on a centuries' old Lapp legend, is consistent with the AFI's (2003) characterization of the hero as someone who prevails in extreme circumstances and exhibits courage and purpose. Whether in movie making or in news stories, this element adds an emotionally compelling facet to the story.

Gendered dimensions inform the hero's story. Scholars (Enloe 2000; Prividera and Howard 2006) argue that hero stories reinforce connections between militarism and patriarchy. The military is depicted as a man's domain, and those aspects of personality and behavior that are markers of the hero are defined with reference to men: physical and mental strength; being unemotional; individualism. These traits are portrayed

as the antithesis of femininity: men are heroes; women are victims (Howard and Prividera 2004). Murdock (1990) also attends to the gendered dimension of the hero, but in her construction the woman is not a feminine that is subjugated to a masculine. Rather, to be successful, the hero must integrate these two components of herself. In some respects, our gendered hero theme is consistent with Murdock's focus on how the heroine integrates her feminine and masculine aspects.

Finally, hero stories reinforce national and political values and myths. This theme is consistent with Indick's (1994) observation that such stories reinforce national archetypes and myths, and are essentially an exhortation for the rest of us to do better. In the training scene in *Star Wars* when Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi urges young Luke Skywalker to shut off his technology and "trust the Force," he is reinforcing the importance of spiritual values in the national mythos (see Hirschman 2000). In the film, *Pathfinder*, a shaman urges young Aigin to remember that "we are all parts of the whole" (Caralco Pictures 1990). Saving the community, must dictate his course of action. Spider-man operates according to a similar mantra: "with great power comes great responsibility" (Adkinson 2008).

These themes are defining elements in hero stories. Moreover, they can be used to construct a hero's story in such a way that the fourth theme—reinforcing national values—is an intended outcome of the hero story. These values, symbols and myths may combine to offer an emotionally powerful overlay that serves to legitimate the state in its military actions against those who are defined as a threat. Before we begin our analysis, we offer a brief overview of the four hero stories that we will consider, and our rationale for choosing them.

We chose the fictional characters because they personify the notion of deliberately created military heroes – one from literature and one from film – who were created to serve specific military and political purposes. Their fictional creators – Winston Smith in 1984 and the production team in *Wag the Dog* – created them because they knew what works in the popular imagination. We selected the two real people for analysis because they are very recognizable as a result of a large volume of media attention that they received. This is the 10th anniversary for the Jessica Lynch story and next year will be the 10th anniversary of Tillman's death so this is an appropriate occasion to re-consider their stories. As we will demonstrate, those

who created the Lynch and Tillman hero stories seemed to have similar motivations in terms of military and political purposes as the creators of the fictional heroes. Moreover, with the real people, one is a man and one is a woman, which permits us to consider interesting gender issues.

Comrade Ogilvy

Winston Smith, the protagonist in George Orwell's (1949) dystopian novel, *1984*, knows that his society, Oceania, has somehow gone terribly wrong. He tries to discover what is wrong, and is willing to become a revolutionary to make a better society. Even so, Smith continues in his job at Oceania's Ministry of Truth where he ironically disseminates untruths. He re-writes older newspaper stories to make them compatible with the current political situation. In the language of Oceania: "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell, 1949: 32). One such untruth occurs during Hate Week, a celebration of animosity at Oceania's enemies, both foreign and domestic. For the Hate Week celebration, Smith invents a hero, Comrade Ogilvy, a zealous patriot who dies heroically fighting for Oceania.

PFC Pat Tillman

Tillman, a college football star, was drafted in 1998 by the Arizona Cardinals of the National Football League (NFL). However, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Tillman joined the Army. Tillman's decision to defer his career to join the Army received (from Tillman's standpoint) much unwanted media attention. He volunteered for the Rangers, an elite Army unit, and was deployed to Afghanistan. PFC Tillman was killed in a firefight on April 22, 2004. The Army issued a press release stating that he died heroically, storming a hill and protecting fellow soldiers. He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star, the Army's third highest medal. There was again intense media attention, including coverage of Tillman's funeral. Shortly afterward, it was revealed that Tillman was killed by members of his own unit in a "friendly fire" incident. The Army covered-up the details of his death and concocted the heroic story.

Sergeant William Schumann (Old Shoe)

The conceit of the film, *Wag the Dog* (New Line Cinema 1997) is that the U.S. President, who is seeking reelection, has been caught molesting a girl. His advisors hit upon a cynical scheme that is intended

to distract attention from the incident until after the election: they create the false impression that the U.S. must go to war with Albania. They hire a Hollywood movie producer to create this war, not in fact, but as a "cinematic reality." The producer uses a soundstage and digital technology to film an "Albanian atrocity," an incident that helps to justify the war. To provide a U.S. face for the war, the producer creates a hero story that involves a soldier, Sgt. William Schumann, nicknamed "Old Shoe." Sgt. Schumann is no hero; he is a psychopath who is imprisoned in an Army stockade for raping a nun. Yet his fabricated story, including capture behind enemy lines, becomes one of the narratives of the cinematic war.

Private Jessica Lynch

Jessica Lynch joined the Army at age 19 after the attacks of September 11, 2001. She was deployed to Iraq. Although U.S. law at the time prevented women from serving on combat missions, the battle lines are fluid in military zones like Iraq. On March 23, 2003 Private Lynch, Private Lori Piestewa, and Specialist Shoshanna Johnson and other soldiers were in a convoy when several vehicles took a wrong turn and became separated from the others. The "lost" vehicles were ambushed. Private Piestewa was killed, and Specialist Johnson and Private Lynch were both injured and were captured; they were held in separate facilities. An Army press release stated that Private Lynch fought heroically and was captured only after her rifle jammed. Several days later, she was rescued. The filmed rescue received widespread media attention. Another press release said that Lynch suffered battle-related injuries in the ambush, and had received ill treatment and had possibly been raped by her captors. Later, it was revealed that she had been knocked unconscious during the ambush and had not fought. Moreover, the rescue mission was staged. The Army and the media devoted little attention to Private Piestewa who fought and died in the ambush or to Specialist Johnson who also fought and had been shot in the ensuing firefight, and was not rescued until later. Both Piestewa and Johnson were women of color; Lynch was a white woman.

METHOD

Although we are social scientists with traditional methodological training, our analysis here is an interpretative and heuristic approach to understanding the social construction of heroes. We originally searched the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*

newspapers for articles using Pat Tillman and Jessica Lynch as a key word search because, at the time of the incidents, these two newspapers had significant coverage of the events that transpired. These are national newspapers and frequently are considered in media analyses. We later expanded our search to the *LA Times* and the *Arizona Republic*. The *Arizona Republic* is a major daily in Phoenix, AZ, the site of Tillman's football triumphs. We began this project after the events surrounding Lynch and Tillman occurred, so we were not able to monitor television news coverage on a daily basis. We did have access to *Primetime Live*, an ABC News Program that featured an interview with Jessica Lynch. We additionally read biographies of Lynch and Tillman, and also watched a documentary film about Tillman.

In terms of the fictional characters, the themes that we drew about their heroism were straightforward. Smith's story about Ogilvy is encapsulated in a few paragraphs. Similarly, although Old Shoe's hero narrative weaves throughout the film, we drew from the salient, defining features of his hero story as designed by the production team. With respect to Lynch and Tillman, we drew from our sources the most repeated, essentially defining aspects of their hero stories. We now turn to our analysis of the four themes that drive these hero stories. They demonstrate the media's role in the social construction of the hero.

BIOGRAPHY/BACKSTORY

Winston Smith constructed such a heroic trajectory in his biography of Comrade Ogilvy. At age three, Ogilvy's favorite toys were a machine gun and a model helicopter; at age six he joined the Junior Spies; at age 11, he denounced his uncle to the Thought Police after overhearing a problematic conversation; at age 17, he became a district organizer for the Junior Anti-Sex League; at age 19, he designed a hand grenade that killed 31 enemy prisoners in its trial usage (Orwell, 1949:42). Smith did not imbue Ogilvy with a noble lineage, but he depicted him as an exemplary citizen of Oceania almost from birth.

The media and the Army constructed a biography that sometimes depicted Pat Tillman as special, but at other times as a regular guy. Stories that portrayed Tillman as special proclaimed that he was "always different from the rest;" he was a "maverick," an "American original" (Coll12/5/2004). Stories often were accompanied by photographs of Tillman on the football field with his long hair mid swirl and his fist pumped in

masculine exuberance. Because he was a football hero, Tillman was defined through football metaphors: he was a "hard hitting overachiever," an "Academic All American" who burned with intensity (Pennington 4/24/2004). However, other coverage privileged a more humble biography. One story noted that Tillman was a small man who never expected to be a professional athlete (Freeman 7/14/2002). He was friendly and down to earth (Krakauer 2009). The coverage of Tillman is consistent with Rank's (1914) emphasis of someone who is special from an early age, but also supports Indick's (2004) observation that U.S. heroes are humble people. Tillman was an ideal hero for the military and for the media. His status as a football hero provided a ready transition to the story about his military heroism.

In *Wag the Dog*, the construction of Sgt. William Schumann's story is deliberate. This construction was an integral part of their concept of war as a pageant in several acts, complete with patriotic themes and even an accompanying soundtrack. One staff member envisioned the importance of a U.S. soldier who was left behind enemy lines, abandoned like "an old shoe." This construct necessitated finding a soldier with a name that sounded like the word "shoe," that is, Schumann. To fill in Schumann's backstory, the production team claimed that buddies in the "303," a fictional elite Army unit, had nicknamed him "Old Shoe" because of his loyalty to the unit. The producer commissioned the writing of a song about a loyal hound dog, Old Shoe, which was recorded in an old-timey manner, planted in the Folklore Section of the Library of Congress, and "discovered" there during the Albanian crisis. The song gave a nostalgic dimension to Sgt. Schumann and his rescuers from the "303." As the producer realized, the Old Shoe story, including the song, provided a compelling hook to the war narrative.

The media coverage of Private Jessica Lynch demonstrates that biographies are constructed by including and excluding aspects of the hero's life. In Lynch's case, selected aspects of her biography are emphasized as a part of the media construction of a hero. According to one story, Lynch enlisted in the Army because, "along with her love for her county and her concern for the plight of the Iraqis, she wanted a better life through a college education" which she could afford through military benefits (Jehl and Blair 4/3/2003). The media depicted Lynch as a "wholesome West Virginia country girl," the sort of person everyone knows in high school; she won the title of Miss Congeniality in the county fair (quoted in Privera and

Howard, 2006: 33). Lynch is a “humble origins” type of hero. Her biography adds a faux populism to the story; she is an heroic ordinary citizen.

The four heroes all have socially constructed biographies that portray them either as special people, as being of humble origin, or, in some cases as both. Their backstories are relevant to understanding their heroic strength of purpose and why we are drawn to them as heroes.

STRENGTH OF PURPOSE

The second theme in the media’s construction of the hero addresses the hero’s strength of purpose. This theme presumes a degree of sacrifice in the pursuit of goals, even a willingness to sacrifice oneself.

Comrade Ogilvy, Winston Smith’s creation in 1984, demonstrates such a heroic commitment. Ogilvy had no life other than that of a committed citizen. His only recreation was an hour of physical training in the gym each day, and he engaged in no conversation other than the discussion of the principles of IngSoc, Oceania’s state-sponsored ideology. Indeed, his only aim in life was to hunt down saboteurs and to defeat Oceania’s enemies. Comrade Ogilvy even died heroically: as his damaged airplane dived out of control, he weighted down his body with his machine gun and leapt into the sea, drowning himself to protect government dispatches (Orwell, 1949:42). Winston Smith intended Ogilvy to be a part of the collective Hate Week celebration by shoring-up support for the state against its enemies.

Media coverage of Private Lynch emphasizes her commitment. During an interview on ABC’s *Primetime*, for example, host Diane Sawyer commented that Lynch “willed herself through basic training” (2003). Similarly, according to Lynch’s biographer, although she was “scared of dying, she climbed into the cab of a five-ton truck and drove it into war” (Bragg, 2003:62). She was depicted as “a 19 year old female Rambo who tried to blast her way out of the enemy’s clutches, taking out any man who got in her way” (Rich 11/9/2003). “She was willing to fight to the death rather than be captured, shooting Iraqis even after being shot herself (Schmidt and Loeb 4/3/2003). Lynch’s rescue continued the strength of purpose theme. One story depicted her as being “buoyant and surprisingly strong, tough, in pain but in good spirits” (Landler 4/4/2003). A source in another story said, “I was very impressed by how brave she was, even lying in bed. She told us all she wanted—aside from orange juice—was to get back to

her unit. She wanted to wear her uniform again” (Feur 4/21/2003). Lynch represented the “spirit” of the U.S. soldier, a representation that exhorted citizens to continue to support the war effort.

The producers in *Wag the Dog* construct a story that ironically anticipates aspects of Jessica Lynch’s story. They portray Old Shoe as a “brave American serviceman” who has been “captured by dissident Albanian terrorists.” Even his rescue story resembles the language that described Lynch’s rescue. “Army soldiers stormed a mountain hideaway freeing a tired but happy Sgt. William Schumann.” The production team planned a celebratory return to U.S. soil for Old Shoe. One asks rhetorically, “What’s better than a triumphal homecoming of a war hero?” However, when his airplane crashes, the psychotic Schumann is killed by a farmer after trying to molest the farmer’s wife. The production team seamlessly shifts from a triumphal homecoming to a military funeral with an Honor Guard from “the 303,” the playing of Taps, and a rifle salute. There are parallels between Sgt. Schumann military funeral and Jessica Lynch’s homecoming to West Virginia. One commentator characterized Lynch’s return to her home town in an Army helicopter as “pure stagecraft—a carefully controlled media event” (quoted in Kumar, 2004:307).

Strength of purpose was a constant theme of the Pat Tillman story. His biographer describes Tillman’s strength of purpose as something almost akin to a character trait: “once he set his sights on a goal he was not easily deterred” (Krakauer, 2009:4). The most frequently noted aspect of the theme, as evidenced in a *New York Times* story, was that Tillman walked away from a multimillion dollar professional football contract to join the Army. He did so, the story suggested, to give back something to his country by pursuing the enemy that had attacked it (Pennington 4/34/2004). Another story suggested that Tillman felt a duty to his family, many of whom had served in the military. The story noted that, despite opportunities to return to civilian life and professional football, Tillman remained in the Army (Coll 12/5/2004). Of course, the ultimate strength of purpose was reflected in Tillman’s death in combat, for which he was awarded posthumously awarded the Silver Star. Even after details about his death were revealed, stories commented that his death by friendly fire did not diminish his bravery and sacrifice (*The Tillman Story* 2010).

In varying ways, the stories about these four people portray their heroism as coming from their strength of

purpose. In three of the four cases, that theme includes the ultimate sacrifice. We now turn to the gendered implications of these hero stories.

GENDERED IMPLICATIONS

Hero stories, especially those about military figures, tend to have men in the heroic role. This dimension of the hero story reinforces a militaristic form of patriarchy (Enloe 2000; Kumar 2004). Even when the gendered dimension is understated, it is nonetheless present.

Comrade Ogilvy's biography stresses boy toys like machine guns and adult weapons, e.g., a real machine gun. Similarly, Sgt. Schumann inhabits a distinctly male world. At his staged funeral, members of "the 303" are shown in a marching formation. As they accompany Old Shoe's casket, they sing martial songs in an all-male chorus. Media stories about Pat Tillman are also gendered. Stories often include photos that depict him as an intensely masculine football player, and his official Army photograph offers a picture of a ruggedly handsome soldier wearing the Ranger's beret. There are, however, different aspects to Tillman's gendered persona. His biographer notes that Tillman married his high school sweetheart and remained true to her (Krakauer, 2009:76). Moreover, Tillman was portrayed in ways that oppose traditional depictions of the masculine military hero. According to a relative, Tillman "adopted an intimidating, cast-iron demeanor on the field, although beneath the armor was a sensitive kid who was easily moved to tears in private" (Krakauer, 2009:20). These different aspects of Tillman's persona enhanced his mass appeal.

Not surprisingly, the most pronounced gendered themes appear in the Army's press releases about and the media's coverage of Jessica Lynch. Much of her early backstory was grounded in a gendered narrative. She was depicted as a sort of "girl next door," a tomboy but also a wannabe beauty queen (Rogers, *et. al.*, 2003:58). Even when Lynch's story transitioned from country girl to soldier, the gendered dimensions of her new status persisted: could she fit her curling iron into her Army backpack; basic training never made her cry (Bragg, 2003:58). Recall that after the ambush and her capture, Army news releases and media coverage initially played up a Rambo theme—Lynch killed enemy soldiers until her rifle jammed (in another version, until she ran out of ammo). Of course, she was characterized as a "**female** Rambo." Soon, however, that frame of coverage was replaced by the rescue theme wherein Lynch became a "damsel in distress"

(Prividera and Howard 2006; Kumar 2004). Lynch's capture generated an almost national anxiety—a young woman was held captive in an unknown location by a foreign enemy—that was followed by an emotional release when U.S. soldiers rescued her. In later coverage journalists typically dropped references to her soldier status, which was juxtaposed with and often trumped by an "America's sweetheart theme." In rescue stories, she was depicted as a diminutive, injured woman. Although some stories portrayed her as anxious to return to her unit, others noted that after her rescue she went into surgery clutching a small teddy bear (Rogers, *et. al.*, 2003:58). From that point, journalists typically dropped references to Private Lynch, and referred to her as "Jessi" (noted in Kumar 2004). Other researchers (Coltrane and Adams, 1997) have noted the media tendency to frame events in such a manner as to reinforce gender stereotypes and to make them appear as natural.

NATIONAL VALUES

As envisioned by Winston Smith, Comrade Ogilvy embodied the principles of IngSoc: his humanity was essentially annihilated by his total dedication to the state. Any personal life was subsumed by his membership in state-controlled organizations, and his warrior mentality reflected Oceania's permanent state of war. Winston even wrote Ogilvy's story in a pedantic style that paralleled Big Brother's occasional commemoration of a lower echelon person as an example to be emulated (1949:41). Comrade Ogilvy was an icon for national values, especially when juxtaposed with Oceania's constant propaganda images of alien soldiers or evil traitors.

Several dimensions of Pat Tillman's heroism story embody national values. The oft repeated statement that he walked away from a lucrative NFL contract to join the Army elevates patriotism as a national virtue (Altheide 2006). The Army press release that fabricated the details of Tillman's death—that he died storming a hill as he tried to protect fellow soldiers—reproduces the classic warrior/hero story of self-sacrifice for buddies and the nation. Noting that athletes frequently are referred to as "warriors," Altheide (2006:191-192) stresses the connection between sports heroes and military heroes, adding that Tillman was an icon for the U.S. military. Krakauer (2009:xxiv) calls him an "icon of post 9/11 patriotism." In contrast, the aspects of Tillman's story that characterize him as a humble man depict an unpretentious U.S. hero. These aspects of Pat Tillman's hero story were conjoined at his funeral, a

nationally televised event at which politicians, military and religious figures celebrated the national values that were exemplified in his hero story. The funeral and the media's coverage entailed a confluence of those institutions that attempt to legitimate the state and its hegemony. Interestingly, however, one of Tillman's brothers challenged these social constructions when he noted that Tillman was not a religious person and would have opposed any efforts to use his story for propaganda purposes (*The Tillman Story* 2010).

The production team in *Wag the Dog* constructed Sgt. Schumann's story to privilege loyalty as a U.S. value: Old Shoe's loyalty to "the 303;" the 303's loyalty to Old Shoe. The production team heightened loyalty with music. Of course, a soundtrack is a standard component of film; it cues the audience as to the appropriate emotion in scenes. The blue syrendition of the Old Shoe song evokes the loyalty of a dog, and its nostalgic aspect evidences loyalty as a long-standing U.S. tradition. Similarly, the "scene" in *Wag the Dog* that featured Kirsten Dunst as a young peasant woman whose village is shelled reinforces the ideal of the U.S. as a nation that defends the powerless. The commitment to come to her aid is juxtaposed by the depiction of the Albanians as the Other. These are the sorts of people who would shell an innocent woman's village or who would hold Old Shoe prisoner. Constructing the enemy as the Other legitimates a war: the U.S. is a defender, not an aggressor.

Jessica Lynch's hero story exemplifies numerous national values. Her enlistment in the Army to earn money for college demonstrates the ideal of individual responsibility. Her compassion for the Iraqi people portrays the U.S. as a protector of the Iraqi people, not an aggressive invader. Lynch's ability to transcend her own fear, and, in the Army's and the media's fabrications, to kill her ambushers, demonstrates the courageous spirit of a U.S. soldier. In the Army's fabricated stories, both she and Tillman are depicted as fighting to the end. After her transition in the media from a Rambo to a damsel in distress, Lynch came to resemble Kirsten Dunst, the young peasant woman in *Wag the Dog*: the coverage juxtaposed the heroic U.S. soldiers who rescued her with the foreign Others who held her captive and allegedly abused her (quoted in Howard and Prividera 2004:89). Moreover, the allegation that Lynch may have been raped paralleled President George Bush's assertions that the U.S. was invading Iraq to protect Iraqi women who were being raped by a barbaric regime (see Takac 2005:300). This assertion legitimated the U.S. presence in Iraq: Jessica

Lynch and Iraqi women are what we were fighting for (Prividera and Howard 2006). However, to a degree, Jessica Lynch, like Pat Tillman, challenged some of the hero construction. She acknowledged that during the ambush she was knocked unconscious and did not heroically fight her attackers (Bragg 2003:77). Even as she downplayed her own role, Lynch extolled the heroism of her friend, Lori Piestewa, who fought and died during the ambush. Lynch later named her daughter Lori to honor her friend and comrade.

Explanations for U.S. government policies are stated in a manner that is designed to legitimate those policies. Specific accounts, e.g., the war on terror or anti-immigration rhetoric, invoke threats to the national security, and serve to distract from serious problems and to redirect the public's attention elsewhere (McCulloch 2007; Michalowski 2007). In the four cases that we have analyzed, the hero stories served as a distraction. Comrade Ogilvy was a distraction from life in a repressive state. Sgt. Schumann and the war with Albania were a distraction from the President's criminal behavior. PFC Pat Tillman and Private Jessica Lynch were intended to be distractions from increasingly unpopular wars, and from the embarrassment caused by the torture in the Abu Ghraib military prison. Their stories also were a part of the process that attempts to sanitize the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

CONCLUSION

At the outset, we noted that we wanted to reconsider the old questions of "who is the hero" or "what makes a hero" by focusing on the media's role in the social construction of the military hero. Not only do the media speed-up the creation and dissemination of hero stories, the media and others (e.g. the state and its military) actively construct them. These constructions are steeped in national values and ideologies, which they reinforce. The audience's appetite for hero stories is renewed with each new story. These constructions elevate the media, especially television, as our national storyteller.

We also have demonstrated that the media are one component of a network of institutions that seek to maintain popular support for U.S. militarism. After all, the military fed the Tillman and Lynch hero stories to the media, which have a voracious appetite for such stories. We do not have data about how audiences processed the initial stories about Lynch and Tillman. We do note, however, that on *Primetime* after host Diane Sawyer acknowledged the constructed nature of

the rescue story, she quickly went back on point during her interview and emphasized Lynch's strength of character in terms of her decision to join the Army and in how she handled her capture. With Tillman, even after the nature of his death had been revealed, he remained a hero. For example, his former college football team, the ASU Sun Devils, enter the stadium through a portrait of Tillman from his days as a player. It is as if he is leading the team onto the field (Haller, 2013:C1). With both Lynch and Tillman's, the media persisted in their narrative even after the constructed nature of their stories was revealed. This is an important point: much of what we came to know about the fabrications in the stories of Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman was revealed by the media. The media continued to repeat these narratives and, certainly in Tillman's case, his status as an iconic figure persists. However, once those initial constructions were offered, subsequent refutations did not undo those early narratives. This is the strength of the hero myth.

We have identified the thematic elements that go into the process of this social construction and demonstrated that these are essentially the same whether the hero is a fictional character or a real person. The thematic elements consist of a biographical backstory, strength of purpose, a gendered dimension, and the reproduction of national values. The four examples that we analyzed—Comrade Ogilvy, PFC Pat Tillman, Sgt. William Schumann, and Private Jessica Lynch—demonstrate the significance of military heroes as well as the role of the military, the state of which it is a part, and of the media in constructing them.

Heroes represent the best in us, and, at the same time, exhort us to do better. Regardless of whether they are mythic legends, modern super heroes or real people, heroes are exemplars for taking responsibility, for exhibiting courage under fire, and of self-sacrifice for the larger good. Because our adulation of heroes is a collective phenomenon, heroes function in a Durkheimian manner: they reinforce group solidarity and reaffirm social norms (Klapp 1954: 62).

However, even as heroes reinforce important values, they serve a hegemonic function. Hegemony is never really accomplished; it is always in progress. The Tillman and Lynch stories were essentially a hegemonic booster shot that was designed to bolster a war-weary public's support of two wars, and to distract public attention from the scandals that accompanied

those wars. That was the intent of the stories, regardless of the actual impact on the audience.

In his analysis of Orwell's *1984* and war in Oceania, Kai Erikson (1986) observes that an important component of war is that we are taught to share a common loathing of THE enemy. Citing Joseph Campbell's, *Myths to Live By* (1972), Erikson concludes that by dehumanizing the enemy, we deny them their humanity, and that this posture is one of the overarching themes in myths (1986: 131). Orwell, himself, would probably agree on this point, having served as a propaganda writer for the BBC during World War II (Dickstein 2004: 71).

We agree with Erikson: heroes are socially constructed as honorable figures. But, heroes must have a foil, an enemy from whom to deliver us. Thus, heroes are useful propaganda tools, strengthening the group's morale and reinforcing its antipathy against a common enemy. Their construction is a maneuver that reproduces a political binary: the U.S. is a good, heroic nation; our enemies are an evil Other. This binary can contain conjure a racial dimension as in a newspaper story about Lynch's capture that portrayed her as Fay Wray struggling in the hands of King Kong. The story offers the unmistakable imagery of Lynch, the petite blonde held captive by Kong, a dark, menacing animal, a monstrous Other (Stanley 4/18/2003). In contrast, Lori Piestewa and Shoshanna Johnson, Lynch's colleagues who were women of color, received little media attention although they fought in the ambush; Piestewa was killed and Johnson wounded. This depiction supports the view that the military reinforces patriarchy and whiteness (Kumar2004; Privera and Howard 2006).

Our analysis is not intended as a cynical exercise, but rather as an avenue for understanding the construction of hero stories and the ends to which such stories often are put. If we have revealed the wizard who manipulates the levers behind the curtain, we hope that this revelation might cause all of us to actually be more like PFC Pat Tillman and Private Jessica Lynch, that is, to be more honest about militarism, war, and heroism.

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