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FORGETTING FALLUJAH: COVERT SILENCE, DIGITAL PUBLIC MEMORY AND THE CIVILIAN CONSEQUENCES OF OPERATION PHANTOM FURY IN IRAQ

Jason L. Jarvis

INTRODUCTION

Fallujah “was the U.S. military’s bloodiest battle during its tie in Iraq” (Alvarez, 2016, p. 244). Nonetheless, most Americans identify Fallujah as a military success (Dauber, 2009), even though it began as an international PR disaster when the US failed to control the city in the wake of military contractors being drug through the streets of the city and hung from a bridge (Kahl, 2006, November). Fallujah is a microcosm of how “the Bush administration won the propaganda war” in the United States about Iraq (Castells, 2010, p. 350). Major General Jim Molan (ret.), Chief of Operations at Multinational Forces in Iraq in 2004, described the Fallujah messaging campaign as “the most sophisticated information operation that I saw run in Iraq. Its product was a daily multimedia summary of the actions of our enemies in Fallujah, to complement the reports of the sixty or so embedded journalists recording the actions of the assaulting troops” (2009, pp. 48–49). In the aftermath of major battles in Fallujah, for example, the Department of Defense (DOD) set up its own *YouTube* channel (Multi-national Forces in Iraq) to counteract negative images of the United States (Christensen, 2008; Smith-Spark, 2007, May 14).

Subsequently, media outlets in the United States largely failed to cover the intense devastation faced by civilians in Fallujah because there was no incentive for them to contradict American officials or risk public backlash from a viewing public horrified by earlier events in the city (Entman, 2006). Even America’s enemies were forced to

conclude that they lost the messaging war to American forces (Molan, 2009). Public memory of Fallujah as a moment of American military glory has gone largely uncontested as media outlets parrot government accounts of the invasion published online and in official press releases (Entman, 2006).

“The widely held American belief that Fallujah is an example of military greatness is complicated by some portions of the historical record.”

I contend that Fallujah is actually a tragic location where war crimes were committed and a civilian health catastrophe continues to take place. The widely held American belief that Fallujah is an example of military greatness is complicated by some portions of the historical record. As Jackie Orr (2016) explains in the printed commentary that accompanies her performance “Lullaby for Fallujah,” the

memory of Fallujah has been a touchstone for Iraqi combatants and American Marines:

“Remember Fallujah!” had been a battle cry of insurgents throughout Iraq. But after Operation Phantom Fury it became the rallying cry of the US Marines. Memory is and remains our battlespace. The defeated not only struggle to remember what has been lost, but to remind the future that a battle once took place. Remember Fallujah. (2016, pp. 164–165)

In answer to Orr’s call, this essay challenges American public memory of Fallujah through textual analysis of a viral digital memorial of Operation Phantom Fury on *YouTube*. The video “US Marines in Iraq Warning Real Footage Graphic” (hereafter referred to as “US Marines”)

was made by members of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, part of Kilo Company deployed from Camp Pendleton (San Diego, CA) to Fallujah. The subject of “US Marines” is Operation Phantom Fury, the second battle of Fallujah that began in November, 2004 (Spinner, Vick, & Fekeiki, 2004, November 10).

“US Marines” is an artifact of Marine Corps institutional memory: a viral “discursive move toward publicity” (Hartelius, 2010, p. 82) by soldiers in the 3rd, 5th Marine battalion. The video has a life that spans over a decade. It was posted on *YouTube* multiple times and has collected over 14,700,000 full views with 70,000 comments since its original posting on *YouTube* in 2006 (Garcia & Saenz, 2006, June 23; Potentee, 2010, August 28; Rainsong14, 2009, May 31).¹ Through a mixture of text, photos and video set to a musical score, “US Marines” characterizes Operation Phantom Fury as heroic and noble, repeating an American master narrative of Iraq (Schwalbe, 2006) tailored to Operation Phantom Fury. While the video has been posted with many different musical backgrounds, the original version of “US Marines” I analyzed has been removed, and subsequently reposted.²

“US Marines” is what Susan Sontag (2003) describes as “collective instruction” about the proper way to remember Fallujah. Despite its titular claim of graphic authenticity, on violence (for both combatants and civilians), “US Marines” is covertly silent, encouraging commemorative forgetting of the horrors of war (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010). Covert silence is a function of memorials that seeks to minimize disagreement through not directly addressing controversial issues related to the subject of a memorial.

Digital platforms are an important location of public memory formation (Schwalbe, 2006) because digital devices are “memory machines” (van Dijck, 2005) that fundamentally alter the way humanity creates, stores and shares personal and collective memories. “US Marines” is emblematic of the “subjective transnational discourse” about major controversies (Volkmer & Deffner, 2010) taking place on digital media platforms. Viral

YouTube videos have become “hot topics of conversation, and are becoming a major force in shaping public opinion or sentiment” (Chu, 2009, p. 340), particularly in a world of fragmented audiences.

Iraq was “the first major United States war covered on the Internet” (Schwalbe, 2006, p. 264). The DOD decision to set up its own *YouTube* channel highlights the significance of this platform for global information dissemination. *YouTube* became a key component of American military strategy due at least in part to the effectiveness of our opponents’ use of the platform, which prompted military leaders to alter their media strategy, making Iraq “the age of the YouTube War” (Dauber, 2009, p. 4). Glorified images of war on *YouTube* are effective at moving audiences because they “filter the conflict through the eyes of the military apparatus itself” (Stahl, 2018, p. 141).

The arguments made in “US Marines” are dangerous because they cloak military intervention in sanitized platitudes, set to dreamy electronic music, accessible to a transnational audience of viewers and media outlets. The persistence of “US Marines” on *YouTube*, its creation by American Marines and the fact that it repeats popular beliefs about Fallujah, make the video ripe for critical analysis and investigation. “US Marines” represents an opportunity to examine the ideological work done by institutional media texts through “measuring that gap” (Hall, 1997, p. 6) between Marine institutional memory of Fallujah and contradictory historical data.

In the remainder of this essay I review the construct of covert silence, then analyze “US Marines” in relation to both universal and particular audiences (Zelizer, 1995), before juxtaposing the content of “US Marines” to empirical studies and accounts of American intervention in Fallujah. At the universal level, “US Marines” broadcasts an American master narrative of the Iraq War to a global audience, concealing war crimes by American soldiers and the health effects of Operation Phantom Fury on Iraqi civilians. At the particular level, “US Marines” is an iteration of Marine public memory that

addresses an internal Marine/US military audience. Operation Phantom Fury is framed as righteous and honorable. Death symbolically haunts the video, but only for American soldiers, not Iraqi civilians or combatants who remain invisible despite the claim of graphic authenticity made in the title of the video.

The research in this essay provides two scholarly contributions. First I advance a civilian-centric history of Fallujah that rejects public silence on American war crimes and the tragic health consequences of U.S. intervention. My study stands in solidarity with Jackie Orr's "Lullaby for Fallujah" and her call to "Remember Fallujah" by considering the human security costs of Operation Phantom Fury. The goal of this essay is to decenter the master narrative of Fallujah by presenting an alternative reading of Operation Phantom Fury and thus "intervene in exactly that powerful exchange between the image and its psychic meaning. . . in order to, as it were, expose and deconstruct the work of representation" extant in the video (Hall, 1997, p. 21). I echo the sentiments of Ross Caputi (2012) who argues that in order to help Fallujans there should be further studies on their health situation, something that is only possible if we "find a way to overcome the stifling silence of governments" about the consequences of American military intervention.

Second, I build on the theoretical tool of "covert silence" to textually analyze a digital memorial rather than live event. Covert silence is a construct advanced in a Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger study of the annual Israeli commemoration of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in live ceremonies and public events. Covert silence is an appropriate lens for examining "US Marines" because viewers derive meaning from images by comparing the content they express to the content that we expect to be in an image (Hall, 1997). "US Marines" is significant because of what it advertises but does not show: violence, enemies, or anything that looks like conflict. The use of covert silence in "US Marines" illustrates that the prospect of creating perfect lasting memory through digital technology (Mayer-Schonberger,

2009; van Dijck, 2007) is not a guarantee. In fact, "US Marines" constitutes anecdotal evidence that digital platforms can remove people and events from the historical record, making it entirely possible to forget Fallujah.

COVERT SILENCE, MEMORY AND FORGETTING

Two theoretical concepts are important for my analysis of "US Marines." First is Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger's (2010) explanation of "covert silence" in public memorials, and second is Barbie Zelizer's (1995) account of the "universal" and "particular" aspects of public memory. Covert silence serves the rhetorical function of eliminating the consequences of war for both civilians and American soldiers, making it possible to glorify Operation Phantom Fury.

There are two types of silence take place in commemoration: overt silence and covert silence (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010). Both types may function as aids to memory, or as methods of forgetting. Overt silence can serve as a mode of memorial within rituals, such as when a community observes a moment of silence in memory of people or events of the past. Overt silence can also serve as an act of forgetting. For example, when a person or group refuses to participate in a memorial service or event, their silence is a rejection of commemoration.

Covert silence is most important for my study and is a rhetorical technique that functions by limiting and/or eliminating references to controversial issues:

In the domain of forgetting, covert silences that are hidden by much mnemonic talk are often difficult to identify, critique and therefore protest against. In the domain of memory, covert silences are about widening the audience that can share a less divisive version of the past. The power of veiled silences as a mechanism for coping with a difficult past lies precisely in their ability to minimize the potential for social conflicts. (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1117)

Covert silence may support memory by “sidelining aspects of the narrative” or referencing difficult issues “that are hinted at but not explored” (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1114). As an aid to memory, covert silence is a conflict avoidance strategy designed to encourage cooperation and reconciliation.

Covert silence can also use a cacophony of data to strategically instruct and control viewers: information overload as a tactic of mass distraction. Covert silence does not rely on an absence of talk, because it may function as commemorative forgetting. Memorial activities can make it difficult to identify conflicts among competing stakeholders: “amplification, in short, is not always about hearing better, and silence itself may be facilitated and escorted by much noise” (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1116).

Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger (2010) identify memorials about late Israeli leader Yitzhak Rabin to illustrate their theoretical constructs. Covert memorial silence is a tactic in ceremonies about Rabin that emphasize his life and achievements without reference to his political differences with conservative rivals (who many people feel created a climate that encouraged his assassination). In contrast, covert forgetting silence can be seen in Rabin memorials that focus on patriotic and nationalist themes with little review of Rabin’s life and work, much less his liberal political beliefs on the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process.

I explore the universal and particular meaning of covert silence in “US Marines” for two different audiences addressed by the video. Barbie Zelizer (1995, p. 217) notes that “collective memories help us fabricate, rearrange or omit details from the past as we thought we knew it.” Collective memory has both universal and particular aspects because, “the same memory can act as a particular representation of the past for certain groups while

taking on universal significance for others” (1995, p. 230). Memory is inherently incomplete, serving a variety of competing interests.

Gaps in memory serve the therapeutic process of coping with trauma, but they also erase and normalize atrocity (Schwartzmann, 2001). What Schwartzmann describes as gaps, are silences: areas where a memorial avoids a subject relevant to the issue. Gaps in memorials are an entry point for criticism because they are intentional choices made by the creators of texts. Therefore, gaps identify the limits of potential interpretations of a text, the boundaries within which it can be “decoded” by viewers and consumers of media (Hall, 1980).

“Covert silence can also use a cacophony of data to strategically instruct and control viewers: information overload as a tactic of mass distraction.”

“US Marines” employs covert forgetting silence as a rhetorical tactic to reproduce a master narrative of America in Iraq: a trope marked by images of “efficient troops with technologically superior weapons, heroic rescue, victory and control” (Schwalbe, 2006, p. 283). The video is a product of several members of the 3rd, 5th Marine battalion stationed at Camp Pendleton in San Diego, CA. At the universal level, “US Marines” addresses

a transnational public audience for whom covert forgetting silence obscures controversies surrounding Operation Phantom Fury by cloaking the event in positive ideologically charged frames. Subsequently, “US Marines” suppresses crimes perpetrated against the Iraqi civilian population and the public health nightmare caused by Phantom Fury, attempting to eliminate them from global public memory.

At the particular level, “US Marines” addresses an internal military audience with an ideologically charged ode to American service people that starkly erases violence experienced by, and perpetrated by, American soldiers. “US Marines” masks the continuing complicity of American soldiers and average American citizens in multiple layers of violence against civilians in Iraq. Oblique

references to death commemorate the ultimate sacrifice of American soldiers in a subtle way, omitting images of danger and death that are parts of life for everyone in a war-zone.

CRITIQUE OF "US MARINES"

I divide "US Marines" into three analytical sections. The first third of the video is marked by three ideologically charged terms that frame the service of Marines: "Honor," "Courage," and "Commitment." All three words appear in bold font and shiny silver letters against a black background. These concepts represent ideas that are important for the institutional identity of Marines.³ They also serve to frame the key argument that "US Marines" expresses: Operation Phantom Fury was a noble effort that represents the U.S. Marine Corps at its institutional best.

It is unclear whether the images shown between the frames actually support the assertion that Phantom Fury was courageous and honorable. After the term "Honor," viewers see images of soldiers running with weapons, apparently training. After "Courage," soldiers are shown riding in a vehicle, perhaps deploying to a battle. "Commitment" precedes a scene of soldiers going up steps with guns drawn. It is impossible to know if we are being shown "Courage" or "Commitment" when a soldier is riding inside a tank unless we are sure that they are going into battle. Covert silence about the horrors of war is deployed as viewers see no images of conflict. Rather, the images appear to be self-referential, but they do not provide any tangible evidence of Marine valor in Iraq.

This first third of "US Marines" concludes with a transition section marked by the word "Operation" shown on the screen followed by the words "Phantom Fury" on a black background. The editing includes elongation of the term "Phantom Fury" as it fades into a soldier firing a rocket launcher, and a close-up of burning cars. The seal of the 3rd, 5th Marines follows 1 minute and 14 seconds into the video.⁴ Phantom Fury is directly linked with the frames of honor, courage, and commitment, and the 3rd, 5th Marine

battalion. There can be no doubt that the video is a soldier-generated digital memorial to Marine action in Fallujah.

The second portion of "US Marines" begins with the crest of the 3rd, 5th Marines. According to the 3rd, 5th website (3rd Battalion 5th Marines - Get Some, 2010, October 10) the shield was created after the unit returned from Vietnam in 1973. The upper quadrant of the 3rd, 5th crest contains three black fleurs-de-lis above the words "BELLEAU WOOD." The fleur-de-lis is an emblem of the King of France that is important for the institutional memory of the Marine Corps as it signifies the 4th Marine Brigade's success in France during World War One. The lower quarter of the seal contains the word "VIETNAM" above five green bamboo stalks. On the banner below the shield, is the phrase "GET SOME" (the battalion motto).

The crest, developed in Vietnam, represents the spirit of the 3rd, 5th Marines and their willingness to do the job regardless of the dangers. The significance of the 3rd, 5th crest is that it provides an institutional contextualization of the historical links the creators draw through the video. The seal identifies the subject of the text as 3rd, 5th service during Phantom Fury. The seal also implies the 3rd, 5th are the makers of the film, something confirmed later in the credits. "US Marines" was made by Marines, for both Marines and the general public.

Images in "US Marines" are analogous to early war photos from the American Civil War and Crimean War: all scenes of aftermath (Sontag, 2003). However, unlike the images described by Sontag or the *YouTube* videos studied by Smith and McDonald (2011), in "US Marines", bodies are completely absent. US soldiers fight an invisible enemy, and suffer unseen casualties. By eliminating people from war, the pain of others – soldiers and civilians, needs no regards.

The only visual(s) of non-military personnel in the entire video happen at the 1 minute 27 second mark. In an extended montage of photographs, a person wearing all white takes the hand of a soldier. The soldier's face is visible, yet the person is faceless such that even the sex and ethnicity of the person is not knowable. The editing

dehumanizes the individual by using her as a prop to valorize Marine actions. A second image depicts a soldier in a tank driving past something burning. The burning thing (human?) appears twice, and the second visual lingers on the image for ten seconds before showing a soldier from behind staring down a bridge; suggesting that the editors felt the burning thing on the ground was important to their message.

The bridge is a symbolic marker of violence against America. In a grisly incident prior to the first invasion of Fallujah (“Bodies mutilated in Iraq attack,” 2004, March 31), four American contractors were shot, burned, dismembered and then hung from a bridge in Fallujah. The photo of the bridge in “US Marines” implies that the unidentified thing burning near the road is a non-American body: payback for the death of four American ghosts lurking in the background. They are a veiled presence that haunts the remainder of the video.

The other significant component of this section occurs at the 1:25 mark. An image of a hand holding two Purple Hearts demonstrates covert memorial silence: suggesting death without actually showing it. The medals represent visual and material evidence of the costs of conflict for the 3rd, 5th Marines and by synecdochic extension, all American (but not non-American) soldiers serving in Iraq. With both the bridge and the Purple Hearts, death is a ghost – a psychological specter, never witnessed in this virtual memory of Iraq (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007).

The final section of “US Marines” begins with a quotation: “Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war. –William Shakespeare.” In this portion of “US Marines”, scenes of destroyed buildings are numerous. There can be no doubt that Operation Phantom Fury resulted in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. At the 2:16 second mark, we see smoke rising from a set of buildings that include a minaret, indicative of a mosque. The minaret precedes a photo of another mosque, also in flames. The “dogs of war” have been “let loose” upon a faceless enemy identified solely by Muslim

holy buildings. No other point in the video provides any hint of the identity of an enemy in the conflict.

Significantly, the mosques also represent the only geographic markers of the location of the events in “US Marines.” It is difficult not to conclude that the “dogs” are attacking the evil inherent in a monolithic Muslim enemy.⁵ What is striking about the mosques is that they identify an enemy that *was not* the target in Iraq. Saddam was a secular dictator, who violently suppressed extremist Islamic movements like Al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, the mosques are prominently displayed in “US Marines” providing an ideological stepping-stone for viewers who are led to see conflict in Fallujah as part of a larger struggle between America and Islam.

In addition to the words and text, the soundtrack for “US Marines” is a song by 009 Soundsystem called “Born to be wasted.” The lyrics to “Born to be wasted” raise the question of what “wasted” means. Within the context of the song, it would appear wasted connotes a soldier who was born to be killed in combat (rather than intoxicated). The musical score is essential to covert forgetting silence in “US Marines.” The music provides a pleasant dreamlike feel to the images of material destruction in “US Marines.” Subsequently, “US Marines” discourages viewers from contemplating the consequences of conflict through a complex mixture of both visual and auditory memorial cacophony.

“US Marines” concludes with a quote attributed to General George Patton: “As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I have no fear because I am the meanest motherfucker in the whole valley.” America is not weak. America is strong, nobly fulfilling its manifest destiny as a leader of democracy through liberating the oppressed people of Iraq. Soldiers are not vulnerable. They are fearless and cannot die. If they die, their legacy lives on through the Marine Corps.

Immediately following the quote by Patton is a snapshot of a helmet sitting on an American soldier’s gear. At the end of the video, death subtly

returns in the form of an American flag and two Purple Hearts adorning the helmet. This is the final image the viewer sees prior to a concluding snapshot of the flag of the 3rd, 5th Marines parading past soldiers standing in formation in a desert environment. The emphasis on American sacrifice completes the ideological process of collective instruction through covert silencing. “US Marines” argues that soldier sacrifices are rewarded and only minimally necessary because Marines are fearless and indestructible.

Absent from “US Marines” is any visual reference to the citizens of Fallujah, though they are thanked during the credits.⁶ This bit of snark is troubling. US soldiers were not an invited film crew from Hollywood paying locals for their time; they were an occupying force. American soldiers committed war crimes in their quest to oust Saddam and their presence will have lasting health consequences for local civilians.

IMPLICATIONS: UNIVERSAL AND PARTICULAR

Universal

“US Marines” presence on *YouTube* means that it addresses a transnational networked audience beyond the military community. At the universal level, covert forgetting silencing in “US Marines” constitutes forgetting as a “mnemonic nuclear option—by obliterating divisive histories instead of productively transforming their symbolic sense and value as a basis for improved human relations” (Vivian, 2009, p. 93). “US Marines” covertly erases two aspects of civilian violence. First, military intervention in Iraq caused long-term health problems for Iraqi citizens. Second, war crimes against Iraqi citizens by American soldiers generally, and those committed by 3rd Battalion Marines specifically, are absent from the video.

The public health consequences of Phantom Fury are mind boggling in their scope and horror. The magnitude and speed of problems in Fallujah are analogous to, but exceed the after-effects of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Cockburn, 2010, July 24). Four different studies document severe health problems in the Fallujan civilian population. In January of 2012, *Al-Jazeera*

reported skyrocketing rates of birth defects for children in Fallujah since Operation Phantom Fury (Jamail, 2012, January 6). *Al-Jazeera*’s reporting is corroborated by an International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health study (Busby, Hamdan, & Ariabi, 2010) designed to investigate anecdotal claims of a spike in cancer after American intervention in Fallujah. The Busby study found that cancer rates have quadrupled across the board in Fallujah, and are 12 times higher for children. Additionally, there are significant changes in the sex ratio (male vs. female) of children born in the region. Busby, Hamdan and Ariabi (2010) compare the results of military intervention in Fallujah to the health consequences of working in a uranium mine.

A 2011 study found that cancer rates in Fallujah were higher than in neighboring countries and are worst in the city center of Fallujah where the fighting was most severe (Al-Faluji, Ali, & Al-Esawi, 2012). A third study in the *Bulletin of Environmental Contamination and Toxicology* (Al-Sabbak et al., 2012) calls the birth defects in Iraq an “epidemic” pinpointing metal contamination as the cause. The Al-Sabbak study corroborates an additional 2011 study that argued cancer rates were rising due to “enriched Uranium exposure” most likely from depleted uranium used in American munitions (Alaani, Tafash, Busby, Hamdan, & Blaurock-Busch, 2011).

Covert silence about health problems among civilians in “US Marines” echoes official institutional silence about civilian casualties in the Iraq war. Neither the U.S. or U.K. military kept body counts of the dead in Iraq, with NGO estimates ranging from 90,000 to 1.3 million dead during the course of the occupation (Stahl, 2018). The American government admitted using white phosphorus in Fallujah, claiming that it was necessary for marking targets and creating smokescreens (Cockburn, 2010, July 24; US defends use of white phosphorus munitions in Iraq, 2006). In the aftermath of fighting in Fallujah, the British military heard calls for charges in the International Criminal Court for its involvement in the siege (Verkaik, 2010, May 4).

Also absent from “US Marines” is any mention of a spate of war crimes by US soldiers, and Marines in particular. The Australian (US soldier admits he raped and killed girl, 2006, November 17) identifies several high profile scandals involving American soldiers in the Iraqi cities of Mahmudiya, Haditha and Hamdaniya. In Mahmudiya, five members of the Army’s 101st Airborne got drunk and broke into a home. Upon entering the home, they raped a 14-year-old girl, burned her body and then killed her family (2006, November 17).

In Haditha, Iraq 24 civilians were killed by Marines in the 3rd, 1st (White & Geis, 2006, June 22). The January 2012 decision to give no jail time to Staff Sergeant Frank Wuterich for ordering the killings caused an uproar among Iraqis (Eulich, 2012, January 25). No one involved in Haditha served significant jail time, consistent with a pattern of lenient punishment by military tribunals for Americans charged with war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, Corporal Ryan Weemer created minor chaos when he confessed to the murder of POWs (with 10 Marines from the 3rd, 1st Marines) during action in Fallujah. This group of soldiers is from the same company as the troops charged in Haditha. Weemer’s confession was shocking because it took place while voluntarily answering questions for the CIA entrance exam (Sherwell, 2007, July 8).

The events of Hamdaniya raise the most significant questions about the soldiers who created “US Marines.” The video was first posted to *YouTube* on June 23, 2006. The date is significant because it is two days after charges were filed against Marines from the 3rd, 5th (White & Geis, 2006, June 22). The soldiers involved in the Hamdaniya case became known as the Pendleton 8 (Marshall, 2006, June 2). Notably, the makers of “US Marines” are from the same regiment and battalion (the 3rd, 5th) as the Pendleton 8.

The Pendleton 8 were all convicted for their role in the kidnapping and execution of Hashin Ibrahim Awad (Marshall, 2006, October 27). Awad was taken from his home in a night patrol that should have taken his neighbor (von Zielbauer, 2007, August 3). Awad, (nicknamed “Awad the Lame” because of a metal bar in his leg) was shot four times in the face (White & Geis, 2006, June 22). Awad’s family claimed that he was executed because he refused to act as an informant (D. Brown, 2006, June 22). Ultimately, the squad was charged with larceny (as well as murder) because in kidnapping Awad they stole both a shovel and AK-47 from his home to make it appear he was shot while planting an IED (Marshall, 2006, June 2). The soldiers shot him in the face to both make him hard to identify and as part of a “dead check” to confirm his passing (von Zielbauer, 2007, August 3).

At the universal level, “US Marines” encourages viewers to forget the citizens of Fallujah and the ongoing public health disaster they face as a result of Operation Phantom Fury. Furthermore, the kairoitic posting date of “US Marines” suggests that covert silence is an intentional

act of forgetting in relation to the Pendleton 8 and other American troops operating in the region. The decision to use white phosphorus and depleted uranium munitions in Fallujah will have lasting consequences for current residents and future generations, raising moral questions about “US Marines” and any history of Fallujah that uncritically glorifies American military intervention.

Particular

At the particular level, “US Marines” speaks to a Marine/military audience. “US Marines” and videos distributed on the Department of Defense *YouTube* channel are an effort to control institutional and public memory about the Iraq war. Many members of the military felt that mainstream news reports of criminal action by

“The decision to use white phosphorus and depleted uranium munitions in Fallujah will have lasting consequences...”

troops ignored the complete record of events (von Zielbauer, 2007, July 22). Publications on the subject of the Iraq war echo these criticisms, as they have hardened into oft repeated tropes that define institutional memory of American intervention (Bolton, 2017; Molan, 2009).

American troops were particularly upset with a video produced by an embedded *NBC News* reporter in 2004 (US military dogged by Youtube leaks, 2012, January 12). *NBC News* showed a soldier in Fallujah shooting a motionless Iraqi. The report caused an international outcry, as it appeared to be proof that Americans were guilty of war crimes. Marines cried foul over the fact that news reports of the incident routinely excluded the death of a Marine just prior to the videotaped incident: killed by a person pretending to be dead (Freedberg Jr., 2007, October 13).

Fallujah caused lasting trauma for many people who served there. Lance Corporal Pennington, charged with murder over events in Hamdaniya, Iraq carried a map of Fallujah with him everywhere he went, even after returning home (Freedberg Jr., 2007, October 13). Freedberg Jr.'s 2007 article argues that soldiers in Iraq had to follow a Geneva Convention ignored by their opponents, even as they attempted to cope with post-traumatic stress of life in Iraq. Freedberg, Jr. cites research that suggests severe trauma changes the way the brain functions, complicating fight or flight responses in soldiers.

Knickerbocker (2007, August 7) reported that the widely used IED (improvised explosive device) was dangerous to soldiers both physically and psychologically (p. 1). He notes that criminal cases involving soldiers in Iraq frequently involve a roadside bomb in the events leading up to the situation. The problem with an IED is that it is difficult to identify its origin, making everyone a suspect and leaving no direct target for soldier fear and frustration, setting the stage for excessive use of force. Additionally, The Sunday Telegraph reports in 2007 that there was widespread fear of prisoners among American and British soldiers because some prisoners "demonstrated a suicidal martyr mentality even after capture, apparently

driven in some cases by amphetamines. US troops also feared that prisoners might be wearing suicide vests or set off booby traps" (Sherwell, 2007, July 8, p. 29).

"US Marines" constitutes a positive spin on Fallujah that is easier to understand when placed within the context of general frustration with negative media reports and the stress of life in a war zone. What is interesting about "US Marines" is that rather than fill in the perceived gaps of the media by showing live footage of combat or retelling positive anecdotes and narratives, "US Marines" replicates the omissions of the media in the other direction.

What is noticeably absent from "US Marines" is what the title of the video advertises: a graphic glimpse into the life of soldiers fighting in Iraq. "US Marines" stands in contrast with what might be termed a "Restrepo" perspective on Iraq.⁷ Viewers get no sense of the stresses or dangers faced by soldiers who fight a faceless, invisible enemy. While "US Marines" references the death of American soldiers, it remains covertly silent on the danger, frustration and tedium of daily life for troops living in war zones. Viewers don't learn about the physical and psychological trauma of IEDs or the horror of wondering if a civilian is actually a suicide bomber. Rather than an unfiltered glimpse into the dangers of soldier life in Fallujah (or the war in Iraq), the stress of war is lost in a barrage of images that feature soldiers efficiently fighting an invisible enemy.

What "US Marines" does explicitly is invoke the combat history of the Marine Corps. The 3rd, 5th Seal displayed in "US Marines" publicly updates Marine institutional memory as it symbolically references both France and Vietnam in the modern context of Iraq. This reference is not random. According to Keith Brown (2008), Marines employed an approach in Iraq reflecting the unique history and techniques of the Corp learned in places like Vietnam. The Marine Corp was critical of the heavy-handed tactics of the 82nd Airborne and 101st Infantry Army units assigned to Fallujah prior to their deployment in 2004. Marines grew facial hair, worked in small units close to Iraqi

citizens and changed approaches to raids in ways that respected customs and traditions. These differences reflect a military-wide dispute over the concept of “culture” that pits Marines and Special Forces against other branches of the American military (Brown, 2008).

At a particular level, “US Marines” collectively instructs Marines about how to commemorate Operation Phantom Fury by repeating an American master narrative of the war in Iraq, adapted specifically to Fallujah and the Marine Corps. While “US Marines” glorifies Marine service, it does not actually provide a real peek into Operation Phantom Fury or the Iraq war. Moreover, “US Marines” represents a particular approach to coping with war related trauma that stands in sharp contrast to the American soldiers who circulated images of the dead and wounded on the Internet (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2009a). Rather than trading images of casualties, the makers of “US Marines” filter awful events and pretend that war crimes never took place.

Like the Nazi war criminals in Schwartzmann’s study (2001), the makers of “US Marines” attempt to normalize their experiences by creating a *YouTube* artifact of Marine institutional memory that is uplifting and positive. The horrors of war exist through a series of subdued patriotic references set to an ethereal sonic score. The death of American Marines haunts the video, but only to further the valorization of Marine service during Phantom Fury. Simultaneously, the death of Iraqis – combatants and civilians alike – is completely absent. Voiceless, the civilians of Fallujah are rendered invisible by the 3rd, 5th Marine master narrative of Phantom Fury.

CONCLUSION

“Forgetting Fallujah” challenges the institutional memory of Fallujah advanced in “US Marines.” For most people, the understanding of war is based entirely on media images (Schwalbe, 2006; Sontag, 2003). This essay, like the work of Jackie Orr (2016) is a salvo in an ideological struggle to re-signify the meaning of Fallujah. The purpose of ideological power is to naturalize meaning and

control the range of interpretations of a particular idea or event (Hall, 1997). The challenge for critics is to “interrupt the ideological field and try to transform its meaning by changing or re-articulating its associations” (Hall, 1985, p. 112). Hall explains that the ability to advance alternate meanings, or re-signify terms, is how social change take place.

“US Marines” reflects a calcified master narrative of Fallujah. Marines may have acted courageously and honorably in Fallujah. However, there are issues in Fallujah that America and its citizens have a moral obligation to address (Caputi, 2012, October 25). I do not claim to advance the only interpretation of Fallujah. However, I do advance a defensible reading of Fallujah’s modern history that runs counter to the framing presented in “US Marines,” and counter to American/transnational public memory of Operation Phantom Fury as noble and successful.

“US Marines” serves an ideological American purpose as a memory instruction video that applauds Marine service in Fallujah. It is a viral example of a widespread trope about U.S. intervention in Iraq: fighting was fierce in Fallujah, but America prevailed and defended democracy despite the challenge. Only buildings die in “US Marines,” where courageous death is a specter that haunts the video through Purple Hearts. In “US Marines” war has no health consequences, crimes were not committed by occupying American troops and it was nice of the citizens of Fallujah to allow local Marine film crews to work so freely.

The danger of commemorative forgetting in digital artifacts like “US Marines” is that by erasing civilian history, while gaining widespread popularity, they prove D.L. LeMahieu’s prescience in writing that “digital memory will confront the future researcher with evidence so thoroughgoing that it may actually obscure the past rather than illuminate it” (2011, p. 86). Therefore, it becomes imperative to challenge totalizing texts that achieve viral status, particularly when they advance ideologically charged narratives about war.

As demonstrated in this research, Operation Phantom Fury was devastating for the citizens of Fallujah. The invasion of Fallujah itself killed 600 people (Entman, 2006), a small addition to the hundreds of thousands that have died as a direct result of American military intervention, not to mention the ensuing political instability that sparked a war with ISIS. A generation of children will grow up in a city that has had its basic infrastructure ravaged by war, in a city polluted by a range of dangerous munitions that include at least white phosphorus and depleted uranium (Cockburn, 2010, July 24; Smith, 2017). Fallujah should not be forgotten.

The second benefit of my research is heuristic. This essay demonstrates that “covert silence” is an important construct for understanding the rhetorical work done both in live memorial events (such as those in Israel surrounding Yitzhak Rabin) and in commemorative texts circulated on transnational digital platforms like *YouTube*. Instances of “covert silence” pinpoint where the ideological work of “US Marines” is done on its viewers. While broad based statistical studies can provide insights into digital media, close textual analysis highlights the micro-politics of digital artifacts and their persuasive role in the formation of public memory.

At the universal level, “US Marines” encourages transnational commemorative forgetting about the civilian effects of war. By omitting bodies, viewers have no suspicion of the birth defects and sex selection variations of Fallujah’s children, much less the cancer rates of Iraqi adults. At the particular level, covert forgetting silences Marines that they live forever and that the Corps served courageously and honorably in Fallujah by not distracting viewers with painful scenes of American or Iraqi casualties. The dreamy quality of the musical score sustains this effect, even as the medals symbolically remind us of the specter of death haunting American soldiers.

The value of written history is shrinking as it makes way for “virtual history” (LeMahieu, 2011, p. 99). Facebook, YouTube parent company Google (Alphabet), and Twitter have been at odds

with Congress over their failure to limit “abusive speech and disinformation on their platforms” (Confessore & Rosenberg, 2018, November 18). By being popularly perceived as a successful moment in US history, and evidence of military success, Fallujah illustrates the fact that “the waging and representing of war are enmeshed almost to the point of being inseparable” (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2009b, p. 20). “US Marines” is a component of a full scale military social media operation that was able to overcome contrary evidence, thereby rendering the voices of Fallujah’s citizens mute.

The invasion of Fallujah was more severe for civilians than the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, yet Fallujah caused almost no public outcry because it lacked visual evidence and went uncovered by mainstream American media (Entman, 2006). In contrast to authors who argue that digital memory will augur the end of forgetting (Mayer-Schonberger, 2009; van Dijck, 2007), covert silence in “US Marines” demonstrates that digital memory is easily manipulated and just as prone to abuse as biological memory. It is therefore imperative that every American remember Fallujah.

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NOTES

1. On June 24, 2011 the video had been removed and the *YouTube* account of the poster closed. The author has a copy of the original video. As of October 29, 2011 “US Marines” reappeared on *YouTube* posted by “rainsong14.” The number of full views is now just over 17,000.
2. It is important to note that this version, uses 009 Sound System’s song “With a spirit” as the musical background (Potentee, 2010, August 28).
3. “Honor. Courage. Commitment.” are reminiscent of Marine slogan: “The few. The proud. The Marines.”
4. The official crest has changed since the video was posted, so “US Marines” now contains an old version of the crest.
5. The mosques function in “US Marines” in the same way that Dana Cloud (2004) discusses the veil in 2004. Cloud argues the veil is a visual marker of the ideograph <clash of civilizations> symbolizing conflict between Islam and the West.
6. The credits directly thank the “people of Fallujah” for letting the regiment film in their city. The credits identify the creators from the 3rd, 5th.
7. “Restrepo” is an award winning 2010 documentary made by Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington. It is a first person account of the lives of American soldiers in Afghanistan.

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