

## Literary War Journalism: Framing and the Creation of Meaning

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### Abstract

Relatively few studies have systematically analyzed the ways literary journalists construct meaning within their narratives. This article employed rhetorical framing analysis to discover embedded meaning within the text of John Sack's Gulf War *Esquire* articles. Analysis revealed several dominant frames that in turn helped construct an overarching master narrative—the “takeaway,” to use a journalistic term. The study concludes that Sack's literary approach to war reportage helped create meaning for readers and acted as a valuable supplement to conventional coverage of the war.

Keywords: Desert Storm, *Esquire*, framing, John Sack, literary journalism, war reporting

### Introduction

*Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.  
The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction  
that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war.*

—Carl von Clausewitz

Long before such present-day literary journalists as *Rolling Stone*'s Evan Wright penned *Generation Kill* (2004) and Chris Ayres of the London *Times* gave us 2005's *War Reporting for Cowards*—their poignant, gritty, and sometimes hilarious tales of embedded life with U.S. forces early in the most recent Iraq War—famed literary journalist John Sack had already been there and done that. Sack, one of the few embedded journalists with U.S. forces during the first Persian Gulf War in 1991, painted for *Esquire* readers a rare eyewitness portrait of life on the frontlines. And while Sack was no stranger to war reporting—by then he had already covered Korea and Vietnam—what was different this time was that he did it under the Pentagon's highly restrictive pool system,

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whereby access to frontline combat, military personnel, and other vital information was tightly controlled (Fialka, 1992; Mordan, 1999).

While most of the world got its news from 24-hour cable networks and Pentagon-staged briefings featuring its new can't-miss wonder weapons and the video-game sterility of late 20th-century warfare, Sack was doing what he had always done—putting himself on the line to tell the story of men who fought, killed, and died. Indeed, when it came to reporting—war or otherwise—Sack always believed nothing beat being there (Schroeder, 1992). Surely, for those he covered, the Persian Gulf War was anything but bloodless, push-button, or easy (Conover, 1995; Lipsey, 1995). How Sack framed the people and events of his narrative, creating meaning to tell what he considered the “real” story of the Gulf War, is the subject of this study.

John Sack was born in New York to middle class Jewish parents in March 1930. That humble beginning, however, belies the extraordinary life that followed. A stringer for the *Mamaroneck* (N.Y.) *Daily Times* at 15, Sack would go on to graduate cum laude from Harvard, even while editing *The Harvard Crimson* and stringing for United Press and *The Boston Globe*. Soon, heavy hitters like *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *Playboy* routinely came calling for his literary services. Indeed, by the end of the 1960s, Sack would be considered one of America's foremost practitioners of what Tom Wolfe would in 1973 label “New Journalism” (Stewart, 1997).

Sack went on to author scores of magazine articles and 10 books during his long career, including *The Butcher: The Ascent of Yerupaja* (1952), based on his experiences as a United Press correspondent covering the 1950 summit of Yerupajá, at the time the highest unclimbed peak in the Americas; *Report from Practically Nowhere* (1959), a humorous account of his travels through the world's 13 smallest countries; *The Man-Eating Machine* (1973), a collection of previously published *Esquire* articles; *Fingerprint* (1983), a philosophical tome reflecting Sack's take on man and modern society; *An Eye for an Eye: The Story of Jews Who Sought Revenge for the Holocaust* (1993), a controversial book in which Sack enumerated the crimes—and redemption—of some Holocaust survivors in post-World War II Poland; and *Dragonhead: The True Story of the Godfather of Chinese Crime—His Rise and Fall* (2001), a 12-year odyssey in which Sack ate, traveled, and sometimes lived with some of the world's most ruthless criminals.

But Sack's real forte was always war reporting. Through his long and fruitful collaboration with *Esquire* magazine—a bastion of creative nonfiction since the early 1960s—Sack and his unique brand of literary war journalism would provide the world with some of its most enduring and compelling tales of humanity's gravest of endeavors. One of the few journalists to cover firsthand each of America's wars over the last 60 years, Sack's reportage would help shed new light on everything from Army life during the Korean War (Sack, 1953) and the myriad challenges of Vietnam (Sack, 1967; Sack, 1968; Sack, 1971) to the terror and triumph of rolling across Kuwait in a 60-ton Abrams tank (Sack, 1995) and peacekeeping operations in the Balkans (Sack, 1997). At 71—just three years before he would die of complications following a bone marrow transplant—Sack once again saddled up as *Esquire's* man on the ground when he accompanied U.S. troops trying

to root out al-Qaeda fighters in the Afghan mountains during Operation Anaconda (Murphy, 2001; Sack, 2002).

Yet, even as a literary journalist endeavoring to reveal what he considered to be a more truthful portrait of war by employing many of the novelist's tricks of the trade, including scene-by-scene construction, dialogue, metaphor, and foreshadowing, Sack nevertheless was a *journalist* first and foremost. While some of his fellow New Journalism pioneers like Michael Herr and Hunter S. Thompson often fictionalized elements to get to what they considered a "higher truth" (Weingarten, 2006), Sack instead believed in the axiom "truth is stranger than fiction." His devotion was to rigorous accuracy, sometimes spending years researching his subjects, checking and rechecking sources, all to ensure that the final product was as close to truth as human fallacy allows.

But a devotion to accuracy did not necessarily translate to a dedication to *objectivity*. Much like Herr, Thompson, Tom Wolfe, and other literary luminaries, Sack had little faith in traditional journalism's ability to convey truth, especially the truth about war (Stewart, 1997). "I myself don't believe in objectivity—no New Journalist does," Sack once said in an interview (Quoted in Schroeder, 1992, p. 20). Instead, he believed, homing in on the closest version of truth mandated that he infuse his narratives with a subjective point of view. And if the reader was unaware of Sack's perspective, so much the better.

I'm playing a diabolical trick on the reader. I want the reader to feel that he or she is being handed raw information, raw facts, that objective facts have just been plunked in front of the reader and haven't passed through anybody else's consciousness. This is a shuck. Obviously everything has passed through my consciousness, and I'm just taking advantage of this whole American belief in objectivity. *I'm merely recounting the incidents that are important to me, and recounting them the way I happened to see them* [emphasis mine]. Somebody else, anybody else, could go through the same experience and see it quite differently. (Schroeder, 1992, p. 20)

Sack believed that two ingredients were essential to accurately portraying war: experiencing events first-hand and discarding what he saw as the artificially dispassionate, even misleading, constraints of conventional journalism. Sack wielded this unique approach to render what he believed to be a more penetrating exploration of Americans at war. And while Sack had already had plenty of hard-won experience covering wars in Korea and Vietnam, it was the 1991 Gulf War where his work shined perhaps the brightest, offering a badly needed counter viewpoint on a conflict seen by many as a bloodless "video game" war (Conover, 1995; Fialka, 1992; Mordan, 1999). By using a rhetorical approach to frame analysis, this article intends to elucidate Sack's unique subjective approach to literary war journalism, examine the ways he created *meaning* within the narrative, and reveal how both helped bring readers his "higher truth" about the Gulf War.

## Literature Review

### *Framing Theory*

Framing in mass communication is the process by which communicators, intentionally or unintentionally, construct a point of view that helps foster a particular interpretation of a given situation (Kuypers, 2006). While framing theory has its roots in first- and second-level agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 2004), frames move beyond issue and attribute salience and instead “consist of key words, metaphors, concepts, symbols, visual images...that convey consonant meanings across time” (Entman, 1991, p. 7). A frame, then, is the “central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration” of certain attributes (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1991, p. 11). Facts are neutral until “being embedded in a frame or storyline that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others” (Gamson, 1989, p. 157). Frames have “the power to structure thought, to shape how we think about public issues, political candidates or other objects in the news” (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001, p. 11).

Framing, then, involves the selection and emphasis of some aspects of an issue (and the exclusion of others) in such a way “as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). As noted, framing can be said to be a step beyond traditional levels of agenda setting whereby the media transfer issue and attribute salience. Indeed, “whereas agenda-setting would allow us to count the instances of press comments on [a] topic, framing analysis allows us to discover how the comments shape our perceptions of the topic” (Kuypers & Cooper, 2005, p. 2). In summary, frames consist of object attributes, quote selection, source selection and emphasis, anecdote selection, symbolic language, included/excluded information, metaphors, and editorial commentary—in other words, *how* a journalist decides to tell a story (Kuypers, 2009).

But not all frames are created equal. Indeed, there can be many competing frames within a given text. However, only those frames sufficiently prevalent and recurrent enough to “drown out” competing frames, rendering contrary information of “such low salience as to be of little practical use to most audience members” (Entman, 1991, p. 21), are said to be “dominant” and plausibly capable of influencing readers’ interpretation of specific elements within an event or issue. For example, suppose a war correspondent chooses to emphasize attributes, quotes, anecdotes, and commentary that cast men-at-arms as barbaric and cruel in combat. Let us call this a **Barbaric/Cruel Soldier** frame. This frame only becomes dominant, however, when competing frames that demonstrate contrary behavior—i.e., soldiers exhibiting compassion, selfless heroism, and so on—are emphasized little, if at all, in the narrative. In other words, *the weaker competing frame is drowned out* by the more prevalent, recurrent, and coherent dominant frame.

In addition, a so-called *master narrative* might be present. A master narrative comprises the dominant frames within a given text and can dramatically shape readers’ interpretation of the *overall* event (Kuypers, 2006). In other words, the master narrative serves as a powerful contextual cue, which suggests, to use a journalistic term, the *takeaway* that readers should derive from a story.

Below are examples of the power of dominant frames and master narrative to influence interpretation of events and issues.

A 1997 study by Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley involving the coverage of a Ku Klux Klan rally not only analyzed for frames but also measured audience response to the overall story. Participants were shown one of two versions of a KKK march story. The first employed heavy use of quotes and information that supported the Klan's constitutional right to march and speak. This could be described as a **free speech** dominant frame, repeated and emphasized enough to drown out possible competing frames, such as **abhorrence of the Klan**. Further, the master narrative—the takeaway—could be labeled **First Amendment trumps message**. In other words, society's commitment to the ideal of free speech supersedes concerns over disruptive viewpoints. The second story, by contrast, framed the issue as one of **public disorder** by emphasizing the often violent and disruptive nature of Klan marchers. Here, the master narrative emerges as **law and order** rather than an unflinching commitment to free speech. Survey data from the second part of the study demonstrate the power of frames in influencing news consumers' interpretation of events: "Participants who viewed the free speech story expressed more tolerance for the Klan than those participants who watched the public disorder story" (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 567).

Similarly, an earlier study by Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991) found that when the news topic of mandatory HIV testing was framed to accentuate **individual civil liberties**, a majority of the U.S. public supported the privacy rights of those living with AIDS. But when the same issue was framed to accentuate **public health concerns**, the public supported mandatory testing.

### *Literary Journalism*

What we today call literary journalism, known alternatively as creative nonfiction, narrative journalism, and the New Journalism of the 1960s (Wolfe & Johnson, 1973), has been a vital genre of American and British journalism since at least the mid-19th century (Hartsock, 2000). Throughout its evolution, various sub-genres have emerged that focus on specific areas of interest, such as muckraking, environmentalism, literary sports journalism, personality profiles, and literary war journalism (Kerrane & Yagoda, 1997).

So what is literary journalism? We can begin by establishing what it is *not*. Literary journalism is not mainstream journalism, espousing neither the direct language, inverted pyramid, direct quotes, and attribution of traditional hard news, nor the delayed lead, nut graph, and standard transitions between sources and information chunks found in mainstream feature stories (Kerrane & Yagoda, 1997; Weber, 1980). Literary journalism, while also nonfiction, is concerned first and foremost with narrative. It tells a story, complete with a beginning, middle, and end.

Other aspects might include the use of first-person/third-person voice, symbolism, metaphor, foreshadowing, immersion reporting, digression, and an intimate voice that is informal, human, frank, and/or ironic (Murphy, 1974; Sims & Kramer, 1995). Wolfe and Johnson (1973) identified still other characteristics of the genre, including the use of status-of-life details (ordinary details of life/environment that work to better illustrate the subject or character), reconstructed

dialogue (to more faithfully depict how subjects speak and interact), and scene-by-scene construction (which enables the reader to almost “watch” as the story unfolds). In short, literary journalism employs many of the tools of the novelist to tell a nonfiction tale. Still, aside from notable exceptions like Herr and Thompson, literary journalists do not fictionalize but rather “work within the boundaries of dialogue and scenarios that they have either witnessed or had conveyed to them by witnesses or documentation of such events” (Royal & Tankard, 2004, p. 84).

Indeed, whether literary or conventional, “journalism implies a process of active fact-gathering—not just working from memory or sensory observation but doing what reporters call ‘reporting’” (Kerrane & Yagoda, 1997, p. 13). Ultimately, although literary journalism should read like the best fiction, it draws much greater credibility with audiences because of its detailed realism—in other words, “the simple fact that the reader knows all this actually happened” (Wolfe & Johnson, 1973, p. 34). This is what Sims (2009) called the “reality boundary” (p. 11). Literary journalism, although a genre with connections to many forms of writing, is at its best when it “deals with the world as we find it,” never changing the world to fit the journalist’s conception of what it *should* be (Sims, 2009, p. 12).

But perhaps the most controversial technique employed by literary journalists is the subjective approach they take in reporting (Stewart, 1997). Subjectivity refers to an individual’s feelings, beliefs, or perspective concerning a particular event (Arato, 1974). Allowing one’s subjective feelings, beliefs, or perspective to influence how a story is reported runs directly counter to conventional journalism’s stated commitment to objectively reflect the “world as it is, without bias or distortion of any sort” (Stephens, 1988, p. 264).

Sack, of course, did not believe in the ability of objectivity to accurately relate events, arguing instead that a subjective approach to storytelling was the only “kind of journalism [that] gets to the real truth” (Stewart, 1997, p. 9). Chimerical attempts at objectivity only resulted in shallow and distorted reporting, Sack believed. At one time a traditional journalist for newspapers and television alike, Sack felt unduly constrained by the ethos of objectivity:

In those days I felt, here I am in possession of the truth and here I am writing stories that don’t communicate the truth. Why do so many reporters become alcoholic and cynical in their old age? Because they’ve spent a lifetime knowing the truth and reporting something else. (Stewart, 1997, p. 10)

Let us begin by reviewing the historical context within which the people and events of Sack’s narrative operate.

### **Historical Background**

On August 2, 1990, an army of about 120,000 Iraqi troops, spearheaded by nearly 850 tanks, invaded the tiny Persian Gulf emirate of Kuwait to its south. Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, his country devastated following a recently concluded eight-year war with neighboring Iran, accused Kuwait of committing “economic warfare” against his nation by increasing oil production, thus helping to starve Iraq’s already crippled economy of desperately needed oil revenues. As further *casus*

*belli*, Iraq claimed that Kuwait was in actuality a renegade province from the days of the Ottoman Empire and that it had also long been engaged in stealing Iraqi oil by cross-border drilling into the Ramaila oil fields. Just two days after the invasion began, Iraqi forces had routed Kuwaiti defenders and taken control of the country (Finlan, 2003; Summers, 1995).

The United Nations Security Council, led by the United States, condemned the invasion and put into place economic sanctions in hopes of driving the Iraqis out. Fearful that Iraq would also seize neighboring Saudi Arabia's valuable Hama oil fields, the U.S. deployed a small ground force to Saudi Arabia to deter further Iraqi aggression. American president George H.W. Bush then set about forming an international coalition for the possible armed expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. In its final incarnation, this coalition numbered 34 nations, with the United States and United Kingdom supplying the bulk of men and materiel. Iraq, however, remained recalcitrant. After a lengthy buildup of nearly half a million troops and thousands of tanks and aircraft, the UN Security Council on November 29 passed Resolution 678 authorizing the use of force if Iraq had not withdrawn by January 15, 1991. Three days before the deadline, the U.S. Congress voted to approve military action to expel Iraq from Kuwait (Summers, 1995).

On January 16 coalition forces launched a massive air campaign against Iraqi forces in Kuwait and throughout Iraq. Iraqi military units, command and control assets, weapons caches, and infrastructure were targeted. At its peak the campaign saw coalition aircraft flying a thousand sorties a day, many employing stunning new smart weapons that enabled allied fighters and bombers to target and destroy enemy assets with extreme precision. After a series of minor probing ground attacks by both sides, coalition forces commenced full-scale invasion on February 24. Contrary to Saddam's prediction that coalition forces would drive directly into the heart of Kuwait—and the bulk of his defenses—allied units under the direction of U.S. Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf instead affected the now-famous “left hook,” with armored forces sweeping to the west and then behind entrenched Iraqi defenders. It took just a hundred hours of the ground war before Iraq surrendered and agreed to withdraw from Kuwait (Finlan, 2003).

The Persian Gulf War was one of the most heavily covered conflicts in history. Media outlets from all over the world were on hand to record nearly every moment as the drama unfolded. Satellite communications, still in their infancy during the Vietnam War, now allowed for the nearly instantaneous transmission of images and commentary from the theater. But this did not necessarily mean greater press freedom. Indeed, whereas Vietnam-era reporters were allowed to roam freely about the battlefield, Gulf War journalists were instead obliged to adhere to the pool system, whereby access to the battlefield, military personnel, and other sources of information were tightly controlled by the Pentagon. Many journalists obtained the bulk of their information from official military briefings (Fialka, 1992; Mordan, 1999).

Many of these briefing sessions gained notoriety unto themselves, as public affairs officers dazzled reporters and the world with taped video footage demonstrating America's new precision weapons. Some critics charged that such briefings helped render the conflict akin to a video game, awash in smart bombs but few casualties (Lipse, 1995). And still others contended that the pool system in general constituted an undue restriction on the press' free access to news (Mordan, 1999).

The Pentagon defended its approach to media coverage, citing the need to closely guard information that could harm ongoing coalition operations in a time of instantaneous satellite broadcasts (Fialka, 1992; Woodward, 1993).

For his part, then 60-year-old Sack saw the war as a chance to repeat the experiment he had started with M Company more than a quarter century before. In a groundbreaking move, Sack had chosen to follow a Fort Dix, N.J., Army infantry company—M—through basic training and into its first combat in Vietnam. Sack, suspicious of what he called the “gung-ho” journalistic style of such outlets as *Time* magazine, was determined to show the American public what he believed to be the true face of war in Southeast Asia (Polsgrove, 1995). His 33,000-word magnum opus “M” appeared in *Esquire* magazine in late 1966 (later expanded into a like-titled book the following year). With its unique subjective approach, *M* was quickly heralded as the first truly anti-war book to emerge from Vietnam (Sheehan, 1967).

So when it became clear that the United States would go to war to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait, Sack decided to replicate his M experiment and follow an American unit from training to combat. He once again sold the idea to *Esquire* and soon settled on Company C, a tank company of the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment, 1st Infantry Division based in Fort Riley, Kansas. Sack even sent along a copy of *M* to Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf—overall commander of coalition forces and himself a Vietnam veteran—along with a request to accompany Company C to war. The general approved, and Sack linked up with C at Fort Riley, where the unit was undergoing final training for duty in the Gulf (Donahue, 1995; Lipsey, 1995).

C arrived in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, on New Year’s Day 1991, with Sack following a few days later. But military red tape kept him from linking up with his adopted unit as C moved into position out in the Saudi desert (Conover, 1995). Undaunted, Sack defied military edicts, obtained a Jeep Cherokee, and set out across the desert to find C. Once there, the aging reporter was hidden by some of the soldiers, only to be discovered by commanders and sent back to Dhahran. It was not until February 7 that Sack, now armed with fresh credentials after other print journalists had voted him on to the press pool, would once again link up with C (Stewart, 1997.) The *Esquire* journalist remained with his unit for the remainder of the war, including throughout the Battle of 73 Easting, still the largest tank engagement ever fought by U.S. forces (Donahue, 1995). Tape recorder and notepad in hand, Sack trailed C Company’s command tank in a Humvee, recording the sights, sounds, and emotions of battle. His unique vantage point also allowed him to listen in as the frantic conversations of C’s tankers crackled over the Humvee’s radio (Lipsey, 1995).

As before, Sack writes not of grand strategy but about the grunts on the ground tasked with implementing it. There is little mention of air power or wonder weapons. Instead, Sack endeavors to take the reader inside a U.S. M-1 Abrams tank company as it hurtles—quite uncertainly—toward its rendezvous with the Iraqi Republican Guard’s Tawakalna Division. As with his previous work, Sack pulls no punches as he describes in gritty detail the fear, profanity, and utter confusion of soldiers in combat. Sack ended up being the only accredited journalist—out of more than 1,500 in the Gulf—to remain with a front-line combat unit throughout the conflict, and the resulting three articles for

*Esquire* in 1991 showed he had not lost his knack for capturing men in combat (Lipsey, 1995; Stewart, 1997).

## Methodology

This study employs rhetorical framing analysis of Sack's *Company C: The Real War in Iraq* (1995), a compilation of his three Gulf War *Esquire* magazine articles: "The Salvation of Gunner Penn" (Sack, 1991a), "Captain John E. Bushyhead and the Surrender in Indian Country" (Sack, 1991b), and "C Company" (Sack, 1991c). A rhetorical approach requires that the text be read carefully and examined holistically to first discover the frames and master narrative present and then determine the ways they create meaning for readers. This approach differs from quantitative framing analysis, which aids us in enumerating what *content* exists within a text, in that it also enables us to examine and interpret the *context* within which frames and master narratives operate. In other words, rather than simply counting and evaluating statistically what recurring words and phrases exist, the rhetorical approach makes it possible to garner a fuller appreciation of how Sack framed the people and events he covered.

Dominant frames are identified by examining the prevalent and recurrent rhetorical devices chosen for emphasis. For example, if Sack chose to tell the story in a way that only cast combat conditions as difficult and then reinforced that emphasis with like-minded anecdotes, quotes, editorial commentary, and allusions, it can be reasonably assumed that most readers would conceive of the combat conditions as difficult. A succinct name is assigned to each dominant frame. These labels are arbitrary and represent only a good faith attempt to boil down discovered frames into manageable packages. Rhetorical framing analysis is an inherently subjective process—as is framing itself. So that readers may evaluate for themselves the discovered frames and their potential meaning, the analysis section presents relatively long excerpts rather than simply keywords and short phrases.

As noted, a master narrative may be present as well. This narrative comprises dominant frames within the text and has the power to dramatically shape the overall interpretation—the takeaway—of an event or issue. Expanding on the example above, a war narrative encompassing such dominant frames as **Difficult Combat Conditions**, **Corrupt Leadership**, **Invincible Enemy**, and **Reluctant Soldiers** might be said to put forth the master narrative **Unwinnable War**.

Finally, a conclusion is offered to discuss findings and suggest interpretations of Sack's approach and the dichotomy between conventional and literary journalistic war reportage.

## Analysis

Several dominant frames emerge from *Company C*. A central theme running through the narrative is the destructive tension that exists between the troopers and their company commander. The men of C are framed as aggressive and eager to fight and defeat their enemy. Because Sack overwhelmingly employs rhetorical devices that support this interpretation—effectively drowning

out weaker competing frames that might have shown the men of C to be ineffectual, paralyzed with fright, and so on—this can be described as the **Aggressive Soldier** frame.

Conversely, C's commander is shown to be the polar opposite. Sack emphasizes attributes, anecdotes, and quotes that depict the captain as overly cautious—even dangerously so. Further, he attaches to Captain Burns monikers that drip with ridicule, describing him as a “prissy MIT professor,” “nervous Nellie,” and “worrywart Willie,” to further drive home the point. The aggressive soldiers of Sack's narrative *hate* their desperately anxious commander, even to the point of murdering him. This frame can be dubbed the **Dangerously Apprehensive Officer**. This frame dichotomy is mutually reinforcing and, as the following excerpts reveal, is prevalent throughout most of the narrative.

To be sure, the tank soldiers covered by Sack are largely portrayed as aggressive and eager—sometimes too much so—in their desire to meet and defeat their Iraqi opponents. Indeed, so-called friendly fire incidents, where allied units accidentally fired on one another, accounted for nearly 20% of coalition casualties during the war (Summers, 1995). Deeply concerned about inter-unit fratricide, Company C's commander, not his troops, is framed as being overly cautious in engaging the enemy.

The first friendly fire incident that C encountered was early in the war as the 1st Infantry Division stood ready to advance. At 1 a.m. two attack helicopter pilots responded to a call about what they thought were Iraqi tanks. Loosing Hellfire missiles, the choppers incinerated the “tanks,” only to discover that they were actually Bradley armored personnel carriers packed with American troops. The next morning C learned that two Americans had died, with another six horrifically burned. In the following excerpt, we catch a glimpse of what motivates C's “dangerously apprehensive” commander.

And the most distressed person in C was its Captain Burns. Burns hadn't been in a war before, but at nineteen he'd encountered death in Missouri, he'd been in the woods with a Colt rifle, *splat!* and the heart of an eight-point deer was an oak-tree ornament, the blood was the contents of every curled leaf. *It's dead*, Burns had thought. *It never will run. It never will get its ninth antler*, and though he hadn't stopped hunting, he'd thought of how very long *never* is, of how a deer never emerges from it, and when he'd come to Saudi, he'd resolved that the smallest—*smallest*—fraction of C would succumb to that dead-ended status, death. And today when he learned that Americans were *hoo-wee!* Were crippled, killed, when he saw that he couldn't control all the TNT around C, he resolved that, if nothing else, he'd ensure that the words on C's tomb wouldn't be “We have met the enemy: us.” “We,” he announced to C, “are a greater danger to ourselves than the Iraqis are,” and he said to C: No ammo. No loaded weapons. If he didn't approve it, authorize it, no shooting at the Iraqis. None. (Sack, 1995, pp. 83–84)

But the young tankers of C, eager to kill before they themselves were killed, could not believe their ears.

C was appalled. Why, there was a goddamned war on! By night and day the Iraqis were creeping up, the Iraqis got two thousand meters away, they looked at C with binoculars, wigwagged their flags, and *dit dit!* tapped out in Morse, the Iraqis had guns, mortars, vehicles, had rounds that as yet —*as yet*—hadn't hit anyone in C. Often, C saw an Iraqi and radioed up, "Black six," Burns' radio code, and "May we engage him?" and Burns, well, *practically*, radioed back, "Where is he? What is he wearing? Are you sure he's not an American? That he's not the colonel? That he's not a PFC who's lost? Can you see if he's wearing dog tags? Can you ask him who won the Super Bowl? Are you *sure* he's not one of us?" C thought, *The captain's crazy*. (Sack, 1995, pp. 84–85)

C's incredulity at its captain soon transformed into outright contempt as the company moved into Iraq and began to contact the enemy. The following scene describes Burns as he directs his tanks toward entrenched Iraqi positions. C sees an opportunity to finally kill the enemy; Burns sees nothing but potential disaster.

"Be careful. Be careful," said Burns, Nervous Nellie, Worrywart Willie, on C's crackling radios now, and his voice was drizzle on C's little picnic. Was someone in C going faster than five mph? "Slow down," said Burns. Was someone in C going teenily, weenily, off his course? "Don't cut in front of me, man," said Burns. Was there a dirt road in front of C? "Stay the hell off it. It could be mined," said Old Mister Party Poop. Were there any—*EEK*—any anthills in front of C? "I don't know what these are but they could be mines," said Burns, who didn't seem to understand he was pissing off C, which didn't think it needed a six-foot-two mom (a mom with a mustache) to tell it, "Do this, Do that." "We're getting a little too cocky," said Burns. "So slow down and think about what life and death is about..." Oh, how C hated him! C didn't see that Burns was obsessed, *obsessed*, with the life of each soldier in C, that he'd have felt reckless if he'd said nothing but "*Charge*." (Sack, 1995, p. 114)

But C's hatred continued to grow. In the following scene, Burns berates a lieutenant in a Bradley (armored fighting vehicle) for firing without permission, even though the soldier's actions very likely save the life of his captain. Indeed, after Burns uses his tank to run over an Iraqi soldier, another pops up ready to destroy the tank by firing a rocket-propelled grenade into its vulnerable rear grill. Nevertheless, Burns becomes enraged when he realizes someone is firing without his say-so.

"God *damn* it! Get under *control!*" cried Burns, who still hadn't seen the Iraqi rag. "I *told* you to ask *permission* first!" In the Bradley the gunner turned down the Walkman. "Tell that asshole," he said to the scrappy lieutenant, "the guy had an RPG." "*Explain* to me," Burns cried. "What the *fuck* are you doing?" "I covered your back door," the lieutenant said unflinchingly, but Burns was obsessed by the murderous friendly fire on him and on Company B. "I have *told* you to ask *permission!*" said Burns. "Now that is the *last fuckin' time!*" In the gloom below him sat Anderson, Burns' driver, thinking, *My God! We'd have eaten a rocket before you said, "Fire."* Anderson wanted to shout to Burns, "Do you know what you sounded

like? A fuckin' bloomin' idiot, and the whole company heard you," and the gunner and loader were scandalized too. The gunner thought, *Hell—if I were Lieutenant Homer, I'd never cover Burns again.* (Sack, 1995, p. 146)

Indeed, some members of C even began to speculate about killing—*fragging*—their captain, a man whose stultifying caution would surely spell disaster as the company rolled closer to its confrontation with Saddam's vaunted Republican Guard. The conspirators even settled on the code word "gizmo" as the signal for action. In the following scene Burns' insistence on keeping a stranglehold on firing protocol—even as C comes face-to-face with Saddam's elite Tawakalna Division—nearly costs him his life at the hands of his own men.

Burns' loader, Sergeant Medine, thought, *Someone should gizmo him. But who?* The last straw came when a startled commander saw an Iraqi leviathan, an Iraqi killing machine, and said, "*Tank!!! Direct front!!!*" "What range? What azimuth?" said Burns, still like a prissy professor at MIT. "*1300!!! Direct front!!!*" "That's bullshit," said Burns. "Direct front is not an azimuth, send me a proper report or I won't accept it. Permission denied." And then Burns said, "Out." Medine thought, *The man's irrational.* Where did he think he was, in a little girl's game of Simon says? Go Back, You Didn't Say May I? He was at *war* and a cannon was aimed at four of his troops, four friends of Medine's, *It's their life or Burns'*. Someone in C, he thought, should do some triage: the captain should die and the sergeants and specialists live, someone in C should do as in chess: should give up a castle and get two knights, *I'll kill him*, Medine decided, *and I'll enjoy every minute of it.* On his chest was a holster, then a Beretta, he grabbed the holster, unsnapped it, grabbed the Beretta, and—and duty prevailed. He slowly let go. (Sack, 1995, pp. 159–160)

The situation deteriorated as C and its sister units moved deeper into Iraq, only to swing back south again for the push into the Iraqi rear flank. Hour after hour of intense combat, coupled with a lack of sleep, rendered the tankers of C exhausted and near delirium, even as they stumbled unwittingly into an Iraqi ambush. Indeed, just over the Iraq-Kuwait border lay a patchwork of raised mounds ideal for concealing enemy tanks. As C groggily maneuvered its tanks through the furrows between the "booger" mounds, struggling not to ram one another, confusion set in. Worse yet, scores of other 1st Infantry tanks and Bradleys became entangled with C and her sister companies, their dark shapes rendered incomprehensible in the green glow of C's night vision scopes. Further complicating matters was that none of the new vehicles could communicate by radio with C and its fellow units. The following scene describes the confusion when Burns and others believe C has already destroyed a pair of Bradleys and fired on another.

On one tank in C, the commander [Sergeant James] looked to his left, looked to where the two Bradleys were, and saw—well, he *thought* that he saw an Iraqi tank. James tried to tell this to Burns. But another commander was on C's radios, saying, "We have another T-55," a T-55 far ahead of C, and Burns was replying, "We're dorked right now. I can't *begin* to have confidence it's not a friendly," and James couldn't cut in. To his tired eyes, the Iraqi tank moved, the turret turned, the

cannon pointed at one of C's vulnerable grills and James cried immediately, "Fire!" "White!" the lieutenant cried, *white* was his four collected tanks. "Don't fire till you got *permission!*" then onto C's radios came Burns. "White! White! White!" said Burns. His words were stones, they fell with an awful finality. "Cease! Fuckin'! Fire!" "Cease fire!" the colonel radioed to Burns. "You may have shot a Bradley!" "Who shot? Who shot? White two," Burns asked, "Did you open fire?" "Roger," said Sergeant James. And crump. Something in Burns went limp. Burns was a man who'd been de-boned. (Sack, 1995, pp. 179–181)

Yet while Burns, the colonel, and others initially believed C had killed its own, all three "Bradleys" were quickly found to be Iraqi tanks lying in ambush. C's instinctive disregard for Burns' caution had saved lives.

But even as C is portrayed as righteously insubordinate—even to the point of killing its commanding officer—and eager to fight and kill Iraqis, there is also a powerful frame of empathy and compassion for its enemy. C's soldiers take genuine pity on their vanquished foes, many of who were attempting to kill the Americans just hours before. Once the fighting is done, the young men of C smile and wave, handing out their own food and water, and pointing the way "home." The Americans are thankful the Iraqis surrender in such large numbers, grateful to end the killing. Indeed, some soldiers even weep for the lowly and degraded state of their erstwhile enemy. This frame can be described as the **Benevolent American Soldier**.

In the following scene, C is overwhelmed—and relieved—as waves of Iraqis come forward to surrender.

[C] used their red-and-white headdresses to tie their hands behind them. It thought, *We won't have to kill them now*, and it was grateful to these two hundred sensible men. [Captain John Bushyhead] now went among the Iraqis saying, "Don't worry! Don't worry! We won't hurt you!" He patted his shoulder and said, "We're Americans," patted the Iraqis, too, put his palms in the Indian-from-India salutation, saluted. He said to the English-speaking man, "We'll feed you! We'll get you water! We'll abide by the Geneva Convention! We'll treat you well!" (Sack, 1995, pp. 108–109)

In another scene, C, who moments before had been prepared to kill, now felt nothing but pity as yet another wave of bedraggled Iraqis came forth to surrender. Indeed, perhaps against even common sense, C distributed its own food and water to its erstwhile enemy.

Not stopping, C shouted, "Go south," but the Iraqis patted their lips like Indians going "Woo woo," and C, interpreting this as "We're hungry," tossed them a carton of MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] or, somewhat mischievously, a bag of MRE pork ("But that's against their religion, isn't it?") As the food hit the sand, the Iraqis just dove on it, dove like on fumbled footballs, dove in front of C's roaring tanks, and "Hey!" the commanders shouted, "watch out!" In time, C was tossing out MREs as if it were fleeing from wolves. The bags of beef stew, chicken stew, of pears, peaches,

applesauce, of maple cakes, cherry cakes, and even of Tootsie Rolls were C's letters to the Iraqis, "We didn't want to kill you, and now we don't have to. Thank you." C, as the colonel had said, was from the block and the barrio, and it had sympathy for the Iraqi unfortunates. One boy in C was weeping. The boy, a medic, rode in a red-crossed vehicle that the Iraqis were herding around, patting their lips and, like Barbary pirates, trying to climb aboard, and the boy was Saint Bridget in his largess with his MREs. Weeping, he handed them out, but the Iraqis squabbled and cursed, and pulled the MREs from their buddies' pockets, and he had to pacify them by tossing more. At last someone in C said, "We'll be beggin' like *them*," the driver accelerated, the Iraqis chased after him, and the saint tossed the last of his MREs, still weeping. (Sack, 1995, pp. 134–135)

And even after the fight with the vaunted Tawakalna Division, C's special nemesis, there was still room for compassion. C surveyed the destruction, as the burned-out hulks of countless Iraqi tanks shared their sandy resting place with equally countless Iraqi corpses, some so ripped and destroyed as to make them nearly unrecognizable as human. But there were still more Iraqis who were alive, filthy and cringing in makeshift bunkers. When they spotted C, most happily surrendered.

A lot of Iraqis grabbed C's hands, wrists and arms and kissed them, and C laughed and said, "I'm not into that." C was gentle again. It told the Iraqis, "We won't hurt you," and took their rifles but not their money or Korans. It gave them MREs, and when the Iraqis signaled *no* and pointed to C's right hands, C gave them the MREs with C's right hands. It told the Iraqis, "Go west," meaning "Go to the POW camps," but out of pity it sometimes told them, "Go home." One boy in C who'd studied his *Soldier's Guide* said, "Shammal," meaning "North," and pointed to Baghdad, and one boy squatted and, in the sand, drew a square house, square door, square windows, and at the side a wide-skirted wife and a child, then he told the Iraqi, "Go home." The boy (and the rest of C) wanted to go home too. (Sack, 1995, p. 167)

As noted, a master narrative—composed of dominant frames and capable of dramatically shaping the overall interpretation of an event—might be present as well. The above frames support the overall tone of chaos and uncertainty that permeates the narrative. Exhaustion, confusion, fear, the dilemma of discerning friend from foe, and the strangeness of being in an alien land all work to influence the behavior of not only C's "overly cautious" commander but his men as well. Even as they are eager to fight and be done with it, C's troopers still harbor a deep fear of the unknown, only exacerbated by a commander's excessive wariness that they are sure will result in their demise. But neither are they robotic killing machines, coldly dispatching the enemy with scant remorse. C's humanity is on display too, no doubt exacerbating the ambiguity of war. Carl von Clausewitz (1832/1989) understood well these debilitating effects of battlefield confusion, so let us borrow the concept coined by the Prussian military theorist and label Sack's master narrative the **Fog of War**.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study employed rhetorical framing analysis to systematically discover meaning embedded within Sack's narrative—and how such an approach might differ from, and augment, conventional reportage. Indeed, Sack provides all the rich detail so sorely lacking in the Gulf War accounts of mainstream competitors like *Time* and *Newsweek*. Focusing on grand strategy, technological wonder weapons, and geopolitical machinations, of the 45 stories *Newsweek* offered in its March 4, 1991, issue (a week after the battle), 26 wholly or in part featured the Gulf conflict. But just two delivered partial, *after-action* accounts of ground combat (Clifton, 1991; Morgenthau & Watson, 1991). In that same week's edition, *Time* ran 13 stories wholly or in part about the war, but not a single piece presented more than a passing mention of the recently concluded ground combat. Consider the following from *Newsweek*:

With an avalanche of ordnance and phalanxes of hard-charging tanks, allied land forces finally swarmed into Kuwait and southern Iraq at 4 o'clock Sunday morning. The defeat of Saddam Hussein's Army was foreordained. But confident American generals had a grander goal in mind: the greatest feat of arms since World War II. They expected tough fighting; they knew there would be allied casualties; they were prepared for Saddam to strike back with poison gas or some other terror weapon. But what unfolded in the desert Sunday was an unequal contest between the most advanced armored divisions in the history of warfare and a large but crude Third World army already groggy from 38 days of relentless bombing. (Morgenthau & Watson, 1991, p. 21)

Written in traditional third person, such stories contained all that readers have come to expect from conventional coverage of war: casualty reports, damage assessments, ground gained or lost, strategic implications. But while American forces most certainly *were* "the most advanced...in the history of warfare," such accounts pay short shrift to the flesh-and-blood men upon whose shoulders fell the awesome task of the so-called "foreordained" victory.

While outlets like *Time* and *Newsweek* do offer readers the vital information they need, these accounts nevertheless lack the palpable sense of fear, confusion, exhilaration, and exasperation that surely lies at the epicenter of human conflict. Here, war is not the stuff of video games, push-button and bloodless. It has real consequences. Mainstream accounts, Sack argued, can work sometimes to drain the blood from war, rendering it no more than a noisy bureaucratic exercise. Not so in literary journalistic treatments such as Sack's. Instead, we see, hear, and feel the action, exploiting the unique appeal of compelling fiction even while retaining the credibility of journalistic reportage. But Sack accomplishes this feat not simply by being there and reporting what he sees and hears but by conveying what C Company is *thinking* and *feeling* as well. Is C's commander dangerously cautious in *actuality*, or is Sack simply conveying what the men of C *believed* about their captain? In other words, where Burns saw caution as paramount in a conflict where friendly fire was all too common, his men registered only dread and anger at their "dangerously apprehensive" commander. This is license all but forbidden within the realm of conventional journalism but nonetheless reflected events as *Sack saw them*.

As noted, those who employ a literary journalistic approach readily embrace subjectivity in their work, and with it we get what journalists like Sack believed to be a more complete telling of the story. Indeed, the very act of framing, that is, selecting how a story is to be told, what to emphasize, exclude, and so on, is nothing if not an exercise in subjectivity. Recall Sack's own words: "I'm merely recounting the incidents that are important to me, and recounting them the way I happened to see them" (Quoted in Schroeder, 1992, p. 20). The troopers and commander of C are shown to be what they are—people, not assets or chess pieces to be moved about some grand strategic board. Nor are they the cutout cardboard caricatures Sack so despised in what he called the gung-ho journalism of Vietnam's early days (Polsgrove, 1995). Instead, the men of C are much like people everywhere—at times courageous and cowardly, cruel and compassionate, competent and confused.

And neither is the conflict Sack reports a pristine technological marvel coming off without a hitch. Recall the Clausewitzian Fog of War and its chief catalyst, "Friction"—that inevitable disconnect between war in *theory* and war in *actuality*. Friction lays waste to the soundest of schemes, the vagaries of man and nature rendering moot any notion of smooth, painless victory (Clausewitz, 1832/1989). Regardless of technological innovations and weapons dumb or smart, wars are still fought by human beings, with all the chaos, uncertainty, and unexpected consequences that implies. Laudably, Sack's master narrative—the Fog of War—helps explode the myth that the Gulf War was simply a late-20th-century video game writ large. Indeed, for the men of C, the war was anything but easy or push-button. And we know this because Sack was there, subjectively framing for his readers what he considered the true experience of war. Indeed, in the words of CBS anchorman Dan Rather, "Every word of Company C rings true, is true, because John Sack heard it and lived it all" (Rather, 1995, back cover blurb).

#### *Suggestions for Future Research*

One avenue of future research would be to expand the sample size and comparatively analyze how other literary journalists framed the wars they covered. Do patterns emerge among Sack and others, and if so, what conclusions can we draw about the literary approach to war reporting and the ways such journalists help create meaning for readers?

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