Redeployment: Phil Klay's short stories about the Iraq War only go so far

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Redeployment *by Phil Klay, New York: The Penguin Press, 2014, 291 pp.*

Phil Klay's *Redeployment* is a collection of twelve short stories about the US military occupation of Iraq. Most take place during fighting in Anbar Province from 2004 to 2008, but the collection as a whole examines a wider spectrum of situations and people associated with the war.

The book won last year's National Book Award for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle's John Leonard Award for a first book. Klay (born 1983) grew up in Westchester County, New York and attended Dartmouth College. He enlisted in the Marine Corps and served as a Public Affairs Officer during the surge of 2008 in Iraq's Anbar Province.

Klay convincingly articulates the confusion, disgust and horror of many young American Marines who occupied Iraq and, for the most part, unwillingly ravaged the nation. He marks the deep alienation of the occupation forces as they attempt to subdue the country.

The seriousness and impact of the stories, however, is limited by Klay's inability—or refusal—to take a stand on the character of the Iraq War beyond the impressions of his characters.

In the first story, "Redeployment," the Marine-narrator has become almost reprogrammed by his experiences in Iraq. His wife, too, has been seriously affected by his deployment. After this she picks him up at the base, the narrator tells us, "Cheryl said, 'How are you?' which meant, How was it? Are you crazy now?" The narrator, who has been shooting dogs with his unit in Iraq, must now put his own dog down, and the story ends on a note of deep-seated emotional confusion.

In "After Action Report" an IED overturns a vehicle Marines are traveling in. None of them is hurt, but they assume defensive positions. They know that the whole neighborhood saw who planted the bomb. Then one of the newer members of the unit shoots an Iraqi teenager who apparently has grabbed an AK-47 and fired on him: "The kid's mother ran out to pull her son back into the house. She came out just in time to see bits of him blow out of his shoulders."

The Marine who has killed the boy asks the narrator, a Lance Corporal named Ozzie, to say that he did it, and he agrees. When they return to the base, Ozzie accepts the congratulations of members of his unit. Later, he and the Marine who really killed the boy discuss the guilt, and the narrator sees the Staff Sergeant and explains the feeling to him as though it were his own. He describes how the whole family saw the killing, including a little girl. He has a sister that age, too. The Americans justify the killing to themselves: Iraq is a hellhole, the little girl has no doubt seen much worse. The story touches on the increasing numbness of US troops to brutality and violence.

In "Bodies" a Marine back home between deployments tells stories of his time in a Mortuary Affairs unit, and describes how he sees the ghosts of the dead from all the wars in history in Iraq. He returns home and everything is unfamiliar. "Everybody thanked me for my service but nobody seemed to know what they were thanking me for." His ex-girlfriend has moved on and he finds it almost impossible to connect with anyone.

Finally, he meets a mechanic in a local bar: "He didn't talk about killing hajjis or act like it was so awesome I'd been over there." He tells the other man a story about a corpse he had to process, one of the worst burn cases that he has seen. The dead Marine was mysteriously holding two small rocks in his hands. The narrator's companion in the mortuary later, says, "That guy would have been holding on to anything."

When the story is done, the mechanic says that he respects what the Marine has been though, and he, in turn, replies that he doesn't want his respect. "I want you to be disgusted."

No one arrives at any conclusions. People move a quarter- or half-way out of their horror, fear and trauma, holding on to almost anything, but never quite find themselves opposing this war or war in general.

There are some critical insights about American society—how could there not be in any honest portrayal of the Iraq War? But these only go so far.

One lost opportunity is "Money as a Weapons System." In this comic story, the narrator, a civilian has come to Iraq as a Foreign Services Officer to establish projects that will help the impoverished and war-torn country. He meets a variety of time-servers, idiots, and right-wing ideologues on the American side, and criminals, opportunists, and those with a burning hatred for the Americans on the Iraqi side. "We remade the Ministry of Agriculture on free market principles," one of his colleagues

says, “But the invisible hand of the market started planting IEDs.”

He attempts to refit a water treatment plant. The designs he wants to use lack the necessary machine gun turrets. Water will only be turned by a Shia-run ministry when the pressure makes the pipes of Sunni households explode.

A rich benefactor insists that his donations be accompanied by an effort to get Iraqi children to play baseball. But the story does not rise to the level of satirizing American society, although the elements are all there.

Some stories speak of war crimes but they are usually presented merely as moral dilemmas. In “Prayer in the Furnace” a Roman Catholic chaplain registers the devastating toll of the war on his unit outside of Ramadi. He seeks to uncover information about possible extra-legal killings, warns the authorities, but is ignored or rebuffed each time. The story turns into a meditation on innate good and evil.

In the last story, “Ten Kliks South” a 19-year-old artilleryman outside of Fallujah has helped fire on the enemy. He wonders whom he has killed. Since he is new and naïve, he assumes that the American forces will collect the bodies of the enemy dead. He goes on a quest to find out. He ends up in a mortuary where a sergeant tells him the truth and asks him to wear his wedding ring around his neck with his dog tags in case he is killed, so it will be easier to remove from his corpse.

When he set out to write these stories, Klay has said in interviews, he decided to base the experiences of others in a broader context. As he posed the question in a *Paris Review* interview: “What did our deployment mean, where did it fit into the broader perspective of what we as a country were doing?”

But this question is never comprehensively answered. The near absence in the stories of any serious opposition to or criticism of the war, or rather, the absence of any opposition to the war that is taken seriously by characters or by the author, mars the book as a whole.

The author can’t or won’t work through the question of why the Marines were in Iraq in the first place. Some Marines ask the question, but it is not something that the author dwells on.

Klay has spoken more than once of the indifference of the American population to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. But that is a radically false conception, which lets the political and media establishment off the hook. The American people was lied to like no other since the German population of the 1930s, with politicians from both major parties and all the leading liberal news outlets banging the drum for war. The war was hated by millions who, by 2006, felt they had no choice but to vote for the Democratic Party to express their opposition.

Klay told the *Paris Review*, “There’s a wide spectrum between a Navy SEAL hero-killer and a traumatized victim, but those are the archetypes—hashed and rehashed in the media, in popular culture, in the minds of people with a lot of preconceived notions but not much else.”

In fact there was a great deal besides preconceived notions about the Iraq War in the American and world population. Tens of millions protested against it in February 2003. They saw though the lies of the Bush-Cheney mafia as the US military prepared its campaign of “shock and awe.”

The tragedy was not that they held preconceived notions: the “notion” of the war as a criminal enterprise orchestrated by a gang of thieves was entirely accurate. As the war went on, millions more came to this view, including many in the US military. The tragedy was that these millions were unable to stop the war, thanks to the imperviousness of the political system to the will of the people.

Klay’s reference to the “SEAL hero-killer” is revealing. To what extent does the population really swallow the propaganda of the likes of director Kathryn Bigelow (*Zero Dark Thirty*) or Clint Eastwood (*American Sniper*), who paint assassins and killers as heroes? Not as much as Klay may think.

In an interview with *Time* magazine, Klay was not even able to accept the characterization of his book as “antiwar,” explaining, “I don’t think of the book as an antiwar book. I’m writing about particular experiences in a particular war. And I don’t like didactic art generally, only because it’s false, because reality is not didactic.” This is simply giving in to the American media and its manufactured public opinion.

One suspects that the priest in “Prayer in the Furnace” comes closet to the author’s views. The Iraq War’s crimes and the guilt, innocence, fear, and suffering of its combatants are removed from politics and history and become a part of a divinely motivated human condition.