



Phil Klay, as both a participant and a writer, has been thinking deeply about war for a long time. In his two acclaimed works of fiction, the book of short stories “Redeployment,” which won a 2014 National Book Award, and the novel “Missionaries” (2020), and in the nonfiction collection “Uncertain Ground: Citizenship in an Age of Endless, Invisible War” (2022), Klay has interrogated, to profound effect and with a deeply humane and moral sensibility, what war does to our hearts and minds, individually and collectively, here and abroad. “I’m interested in the kinds of stories that we tell ourselves about war,” says Klay, who is a 40-year-old veteran of the Iraq war. “I’m interested in the uncomfortable ones, but also in the ones that feel too comfortable and need to be told alongside other types of stories that make it more troubling.”

War, understandably and probably necessarily in some ways, flattens thinking. But trying to hold on to a morally expansive perspective on war, one in which multiple things could be true at the same time — that the Hamas attack on Oct. 7 was an undeniable atrocity and also that Israel’s military response has been cruelly disproportionate — also seems necessary. Can you talk about that moral tension?

There are people who feel like you cannot acknowledge, or shouldn't acknowledge too much, horrors that are not ideologically convenient. This is why you'll have the Palestinian National Initiative on CNN, speaking thoughtfully about the suffering of Palestinians but then denying that Hamas targets civilians,¹ which is an insane thing to say. There was a debate in Dissent, the left-wing publication, about whether Israeli casualties should be considered "pregrieved" because their deaths will be used as a justification for whatever actions the I.D.F.² takes. At the same time, if you listen to more neoconservative commentators, they feel aggrieved that the mainstream media is covering the widespread deaths of Palestinian civilians — as if that's not a valid news story. People urgently want you to feel the moral horror of what is happening, but within a circumscribed circle. I think that is morally blinkered.

Why?

The father searching for his children under rubble that had been his home in Gaza; a parent and child who were bound together and burned to death by Hamas³ — to think about the horror of that in a serious way means not immediately transmuting it into ideological fodder. You can make strong moral and political arguments, but if in making those you feel like you must obscure or ignore atrocity and horror, that's corrupt intellectually and morally. It prevents you from actually understanding the complexity of the situation which you're attempting to speak to and in the long term will make you less effective in whatever you want to do. Out of basic humanist principles, the idea that we must close our eyes to suffering that is not ideologically useful is morally degrading to ourselves. It's repugnant.

This is maybe overly cynical, but why do you think that having a less ideologically rigid point of view is more effective in the long term than the opposite? In the long term, if you blinker yourself to reality, it limits your ability to formulate positions that are based in reality and therefore formulate positions that will achieve something lasting and moral. You need to be open to complexity because whatever narrow thing that you want to achieve in the real world will, if it gets put into practice, be put into practice in the real world. Not in the ideologically antiseptic world that you've created in your head.

What might crack open in someone that they're able to see the suffering of civilian others as just as grave a human concern as the suffering of civilians on the side they support ideologically?

In war, there's a primary experience: a terrified father in Gaza as bombs are falling, unsure of whether he can protect his family; or the Israeli soldier trying to deal with Hamas's tunnel network. There is a responsibility when you're thinking these things through to sit with some of those primary experiences to the extent that you can, and think about them without immediately seeking to churn them into something politically useful. Because they mean more than whatever policy cash-out we get from them.



Phil Klay (center, with camera) in Iraq in 2007. From Phil Klay

We've entered this awful period, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and then the conflict between Israel and Hamas, when war is present in many people's minds in a way that, perhaps, it hasn't been before. But has this moment changed anything fundamental in how we think about war?

I think that Ukraine represents not a good war — because the closer you get to war, the more obvious it is that a phrase like “a good war” has no valid meaning — but rather a necessary war. The clear moral case for Ukraine is about as straightforward a case of a just defense against a vicious aggressor as you could find. There is a certain appeal for that, especially for Americans accustomed to interminable, murky operations where military activities were

ranging from trying to strengthen host nations to counterterrorism as well as more straightforward combat. Here is a war with a clear front line with a clear moral imperative. That, I think, has shifted people's perceptions.

How?

Because Ukraine's ability to resist Russia is dependent upon support from the broader international community, of which America is the leader. After the fall of Kabul,⁴ the betrayal of Afghans who relied on us and whom we didn't do enough to bring to safety, there was much more cynicism toward that American role around the world, especially when it came to warfare. Ukraine offered a counterexample which suggests that America's ability to provide allies with not just material support but also intelligence and targeting could be put in service for a cause which seems more morally clear. That was a shift. Then, in terms of Israel and Palestine, there's a circumstance that has some parallels with 9/11. You had this horrific attack that seemed to demand a military response. If you're an Israeli and you're looking across the border at Hamas, which has been trying to kill Israeli civilians for a long time, what is new is a sense of they actually do have the capacity, if the circumstances are right, to kill, torture and rape people in large numbers; they have no intention of stopping, and they're right there across the border, and that is an intolerable situation about which we don't see a diplomatic situation. At the same time, that political license to take military action is being afforded to a leader for whom there can only be the gravest questions about competence, foresight and the basic morality of his government. America, when it had a similar urgency for action that was translated into policy by a leader⁵ not up to the task in terms of foresight, competence or morals — the torture program was the exemplar of the moral corruption that came from that. That is a very dry way of mentioning that I don't think the Netanyahu government puts enough value on Palestinian life. Which is a problem if you're waging a campaign that will lead to mass slaughter.

In one of your essays, you write, "I'm not antiwar." Are you pro-peace? What does it mean to say you're not "antiwar"?

I think that there are necessary wars and that there are places where U.S. military presence can do good. Where, if there isn't a U.S. presence, that doesn't necessarily mean that you have peace in that region — it means another actor moves in. That's the reality. A straightforward pacifist line is insufficient. To go back to the war on Ukraine: America arming Ukraine with

the support of European allies — the result of that was Ukraine being able to hold Russians off from further territorial gains, and that is a way of saying there are a lot less cities totally obliterated. There were a lot less civilian casualties. There were a lot less people who faced the possibility of suffering the things that people in Bucha⁶ suffered. When there's a force like that, you need to respond to it with force, or, in many cases, the result is horror.

You've written about the need for soldiers to be able to connect their missions to the broader values of their society. How might that apply to American soldiers today, given that there seems to be less and less consensus about our shared values?

The debate over what America means is nothing new. To me, the crucial aspect of American identity is a certain embrace of change. I think of American identity as being like Heraclitus' river that you can never step in twice. It doesn't mean that there are no riverbanks. It's not an amorphous pool of water spilling out in all directions. Nevertheless, a certain degree of turbulence is important for growth and allows for necessary changes to come about.

But my question is more about whether that widespread contention over our values has bearing on how the military might operate.

I had the opportunity of asking Donald Trump a question.⁷ He said he had a plan to defeat ISIS. I said, What is your plan for after you defeat ISIS? He gave an incoherent answer where he said we should have taken the oil. The answer was bad in terms of, is it a coherent policy that makes any sense? No. It was also bad because there was no moral value to it. To say that we should have taken the oil is purely transactional. If you're talking about military action, where you're asking young people to sacrifice, possibly, their lives, evacuating that of any moral content other than narrow self-interest is pathetic. So, yeah, there are aspects of the public discussion where instead of articulating a different moral vision for America, it's an immoral vision of America, and when it comes to the military, it's not worth dying for.

I ask this next question knowing it's clichéd, but that doesn't diminish my sincere interest in your answer. You didn't walk away from a belief in God⁸ — or a just God — after seeing and experiencing the things you saw and experienced during your time in Iraq.⁹ How do you see God in a war zone?

How do you not see God in a war zone? The God I believe in was tortured and died in agony on the cross. God is there when I see another human being and see something of infinite worth and value. God is there in this infinite horror and majesty of the world. The idea to me that all of this beauty and all of this horror is nothing but mere matter seems ridiculous, and I can't disentangle my sense of horror from my sense of the beauty and value of what is being destroyed in war. I spoke with a veteran who talked about how when he came back from Afghanistan, he said: "I stopped believing in God because it made it easier. It meant that there were questions I didn't have to ask." I feel that very acutely. You have God's answer to Job,¹⁰ which is the majesty of the world — a world which is complex and beautiful and blood-soaked and infinitely generative. I feel the power of that vision. I'm also deeply convicted by the sense that there's a God whose ultimate experience was to suffer and die, and yet that's not the totality of the story: That is a central image in the idea of forgiveness and unearned redemption. It is deeply, deeply important to me. I don't know what other option there is.

You mean as far as belief?

I don't know what other option there is then on a personal level to get on one's knees and beg for forgiveness. We're so unequal to responding to the challenges of the world that we nevertheless have a responsibility to. I mean, we've been talking about the current conflict, and don't you just feel stupefied by the horror of it?

It's completely shattering.

It is.

1.This is a reference to an interview that aired on CNN on Oct. 8. Responding to a question from the network's Fareed Zakaria, Mustafa Barghouti, a Palestinian legislator and the general secretary of the Palestinian National Initiative political party, said it was "not true" that Hamas targets Israeli civilians, which it clearly has.

2.The Israel Defense Forces.

3. This is a reference to reporting that appeared in The Media Line on Nov. 6 and has not been verified by The New York Times.

4. The Taliban capture of Afghanistan's capital in August 2021. It followed President Biden's announcement, in April of that same year, of plans for a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops. The Trump administration had negotiated a withdrawal agreement with the Taliban in February 2020.

5. Former President George W. Bush.

6. A Russian military unit killed dozens of civilians — some found with their hands bound and gunshot wounds to their heads — in Bucha, Ukraine, in March 2022.

7. Klay asked this question at a September 2016 event that was hosted by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and held at the U.S.S. Intrepid in New York City. This event was attended by the presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

8. Klay is Catholic.

9. Klay is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps. He served as a public affairs officer in the Iraq war and has written about witnessing, among other horrors, children injured in war.

10. Job 38-41, in which God answers Job's demand for an explanation of his suffering with a series of questions of his own. E.g., "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth?"; "Have you entered into the springs of the sea, Or walked in the recesses of the deep?"

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/11/26/magazine/phil-klay-interview.html>