

The Cultural Impact of the American Sniper Program

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Abstract

The U.S. military sniper program is a highly valued asset that has existed since the Civil War. My research question is: what is the impact of this program on the public imagination, 1860s to present? In other words, how has the image of the sniper changed over time in American popular culture, such as film and literature? The advent of the American sniper program in the middle of the Nineteenth Century confused American beliefs about “just” war, which historically have been linked to principles of self-defense, masculine honor, and moral self-restraint among soldiers. Such beliefs have also been mythologized in popular culture representations. The history of attitudes toward snipers in both war and culture reveals a deep ambivalence about the use of soldiers who, unseen and from great distances, kill adversaries who present no immediate personal threat. Once criticized for remaining too distant from bodily harm, snipers in an age of smart bombs and Predator drones are considered today to be held as morally suspect for being too close to the tragedies of war.



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The U.S. military sniper program is a highly valued asset that has existed since the Civil War. Public perception since the implementation of these mysterious warriors has been ambivalent due to the nature of the battle they were engaged in. Sniper history has been well documented, but a question that has yet gone unanswered is the impact of this program on the public imagination. In other words, how has the image of the sniper changed over time in American popular culture? Driven by many factors, these perceptions can be traced to ideals of masculine honor, principles of self-defense, moral self-restraint, and American ideas of “just” warfare. The historical attitude toward snipers in both war and culture reveals a deep ambivalence about the use of these soldiers who, unseen and from great distances, kill adversaries who present no immediate personal threat. Once criticized for remaining too distant from bodily harm, snipers in an age of smart bombs and Predator drones are considered today to be held as morally suspect for being too close to the tragedies of war.

Throughout human history marksmanship has always been a highly valued and highly mythologized skill. Examples are far reaching and include accounts from biblical times when David slew the Philistine giant Goliath with one “shot” using his sling and smooth river stones.¹ Figures like the heroic English outlaw Robin Hood and his extraordinary accuracy and skill with a longbow have long existed in the western imagination.² The American frontiersman Davy Crockett with his beloved rifle “Betsy” has also long held a powerful image in the American

¹ 1 Sam. 17: 38-54 King James Version

² Roger Lancelyn Green, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, Introduced by John Boyne (New York: Puffin Books, 2010), 111-24.

public imagination.³ Such figures are prevalent in the canon of popular literature and film. One of the more significant versions of the heroic marksman archetype is the military sniper. As the U.S. Army training manual defines it,

*The term 'sniper' originated in the nineteenth century with the British Army in India where the snipe was a favorite game fowl. The snipe is small and fast, and an extremely difficult target. The successful snipe hunter was an expert shot and proficient in other arts of the hunter. Therefore, the term 'sniper' came to signify one who possessed all the skills of a successful snipe hunter.*⁴

The American version of the sniper evolved from the rifleman in the American Revolution to an official unit of Sharpshooters in the Civil War. The term “sniper” was widely used during and after the First World War. Regardless of the affiliated branch of military, the American sniper has been among the elite soldiers in the armed services and has always held an important place in the public’s imagination.

Sharpshooters emerged in the popular imagination when technology facilitated unique equipment that demanded special training or previous experience to use. The most noteworthy example of this implementation of specialized equipment was the Berdan Sharpshooters. In the rapidly expanding Union army at the beginning of the Civil War, a young mechanical engineer named Hiram Berdan, the top amateur marksman in the United States since 1846, sought to expand his influence and show professional soldiers how his unique skills would help the Union win the war. The units that Berdan proposed would be armed with cutting edge technology. Operating ahead of the main body of troops,

³ Bill Cannon, *Texas: A Land of Legend and Lore* (Lanham, Maryland: Republic of Texas Press, 2004), 41-2.

⁴ Department of the Army, *Sniper Training and Employment* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 1989), 1-1.

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they would attempt to break up enemy formations with the application of precision rifle fire.⁵ These men were outfitted with “breech-loading rifles, fitted with telescopic sights and hair (set) triggers...this meant the Sharps New Model 1859.”⁶

Early evidence of the initial cultural impact of sharpshooters can be found in the August 24, 1861 edition of *Harpers Weekly*. In the article featuring a shooting exhibition by Colonel Berdan, the public becomes fascinated and enthusiastic as the Colonel shoots a mock target that the crowd has christened “Jeff Davis”:

[A]t a distance of a little more than 200 yards Colonel Berdan inaugurated the firing . . . [V]isitors crowded around him in every direction. . . . Balancing his rifle for a moment, he fired at the head of the figure. When the smoke cleared away, the hole made by the bullet was observed by the aid of the telescope--the cheek near the nose.

Loading again and after several more shots and hits, the Colonel announced, “Where will you have this shot? In the end of the nose was the answer,” several more “called shots” were ordered and successfully completed to the delight of the crowd that day.⁷

Public spectacles of shooting prowess using cutting edge technology served many purposes. As propaganda, such demonstrations tout the sophistication of modern battlefield technology. When deployed to the field however, views about sniper technology and methods quickly changed. Attitudes about sharpshooters in battle were not positive during battle in the Civil War. “There was a general feeling among other troops that the sharpshooter did not ‘play fair,’ and in some way violated the

⁵ Kevin Dockery, *Stalkers and Shooters: A History of Snipers* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 103-4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 106

⁷ “Colonel Berdan and His Sharpshooters,” *Harper’s Weekly* 5.243 (August 24, 1861): 540.

rules of war. One Northerner complained that sharpshooters would ‘sneak around trees or lurk behind stumps’ and from this vantage point ‘murder a few men.’⁸ Evidence of the negativity toward the sharpshooter when deployed in the field can be found in Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering*. According to Faust,

For many soldiers, the horror of killing was exemplified by sharpshooters, whose work appeared simply to be ‘cold blooded murder.’ Sniping was a fundamental reality of Civil War military life . . . the cool calculation, the purposefulness, and the asymmetry of risk involved in sharpshooting rendered it even more threatening to basic principles of humanity than the frenzied excesses of heated battle. When twelve soldiers from a regiment of Union sharpshooters were taken prisoner in Virginia in 1864, a local Petersburg newspaper argued for their execution: “in our estimation they are nothing but murderers creeping up & shooting men in cold blood & should receive the fate of murderers.”⁹

Conflicting accounts of the public image of sharpshooters during the Civil War helped to establish long-standing public ambivalence toward snipers and sharpshooters. Public fascination and support are readily given when displays of accuracy and skill with modern technology are demonstrated in a competitive or exhibition-type atmosphere. However, these attitudes quickly change when deployment and the possibility of human death becomes a reality during warfare.

Conceivably central to the establishment of negative attitudes toward snipers and their methods (especially the use of telescopic sights), although not a conscious argument, may be the historical explanation of Bentham’s ideas of the Panopticon prison set forth by Michel Foucault in his landmark book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Foucault

⁸ Adrian Gilbert, *Stalk and Kill: The Sniper Experience* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1997), 49.

⁹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 42.

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details a prison design in which the inmates cannot see their supervisor. Much the same as the sniper can see their target without detection or recourse. The sniper has a similar role in the public sub-conscious as the panoptic supervisor. The objective or target has the role of the condemned man. Through concealment and training, the sniper can observe and kill, without being seen or heard and usually without recourse. A condemned person, not even aware of observation, is one bullet away from death.

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. . . . The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.¹⁰

Laws in America against the “peeping Tom,” for example, are evidence that people do not acquiesce to unwanted observation. In 1890 the right to privacy as a legal theory was introduced by Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis. The intent of this introduction was to describe important privacy rights. Parallels were drawn between existing property law and the right to personal privacy.¹¹

Dean William Prosser built upon the foundation that Warren and Brandeis laid and developed the right to privacy into four distinct torts: intrusion, public disclosure of private facts, false light in the public eye, and appropriation. Many plaintiffs attempt to use these privacy torts in voyeurism cases. The tort of intrusion occurs when a person violates another person's solitude or private affairs. An objective test is applied to determine whether one's privacy has been violated.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 201.

¹¹ Maria Pope, “Technology Arms Peeping Toms with a New and Dangerous Arsenal: A Compelling Need for the United States to Adopt New Legislation,” *The John Marshall Journal of Computer and Information Law* (Summer 1999),

<http://www.jcil.org/journal/issue/40.html> [accessed November 9, 2010].

¹² Ibid.

The psychological power of the sniper draws on the same panoptic or voyeuristic violation of privacy principles, thus explaining the palpable negativity towards them. Historically, when the sniper was deployed in battle, the public imagination projected a violation of privacy and of the traditional right to fight back. The sniper was not seen as an extension of the state's legitimate power, as other soldiers would have been, because he did not subject himself to the potential personal harm of battle. The sniper utilized unwanted surveillance and did not "play fair" in the traditional rules of war. Further explanation of the ambiguous perception of the sniper, specifically the implementation of the telescopic scope, is offered by Joanna Burke in her book *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in 20th Century Warfare*. She argues that the snipers of World War I had to look their victim "in the eye" through their magnified scopes, going against the social norms of exposing oneself to bodily harm.¹³ The sight of the sniper is held suspect due to the sneaky nature of the craft and the unfair technological advantage of the telescopic scope.

The effective distance reached by new rifles during the First World War and the sniper's improved camouflage ability further fed the "panoptic" fear of them and continued to affect public perception. The early twentieth-century examples of negative attitude are traceable largely from soldier's journals as well as the mass distribution of literature and the exciting new medium of film.

While direct stories came home with the snipers and autobiographies and books surely had impact on the general public, new forms of mass media such as motion pictures could reach millions for the

¹³ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Basic Books, 1999), 49.

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cheap cost of admission. This new communication device took no time to target the sniper. As the public attempted to cope with the slaughter of the First World War, movies provided visual proof of the horror the sniper could inflict.

A film adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1930 was one of the first "talkie" movies in America; in this film public perception about snipers is influenced on a mass scale. Winning the Academy Award in 1930 for Best Picture and Best Director, the movie has had an indelible impact on the American perceptions of war, and of snipers.¹⁴ In the final scene a French sniper ends the life of the main character, a German soldier.¹⁵ The fact that the soldier is German and the sniper is French is of little consequence. The message is that the evil sniper, using concealment and a scoped rifle, dispatched Paul Bäumer seemingly without emotion or ever exposing himself to harm, leaving a tragically twitching hand of a young boy, that a moment ago was reaching for a beautiful representation of life, the butterfly.

While discussing the contribution of *All Quiet on the Western Front* to the understanding of psychological trauma, Nigel Hunt notes, "In order to successfully process the traumatic recollections, trauma victims must recognize the meaning of their suffering, otherwise it becomes despair. This is not a matter of reverting to a former state, but an acceptance that things are permanently changed."¹⁶ What happened in World War I was a change to total mechanized warfare. Massive artillery

¹⁴ IMDb.com, "All Quiet on the Western Front," <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0020629/> [accessed October 9, 2010].

¹⁵ Lewis Milestone, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Universal Pictures, 1930).

¹⁶ Nigel Hunt, "The Contribution of *All Quiet on the Western Front* to our Understanding of Psychological Trauma," *European Psychiatry* 19 (December 2004): 489-93.

strikes, chemical weapons, trenches, machine guns, barbed wire, and unspeakable personal carnage produced trauma, exactly the message that Remarque was communicating. In the American consciousness, this blockbuster movie and the very popular 1929 book told stories of the human, and allowed for a processing of the trauma, adding to the hyper-consciousness of the body that was prevalent at the time. The sniper represents a key component in that trauma. In the public perception, World War I soldiers could survive all of the aforementioned killing methods, but just like Bäumer, a single bullet, fired from an unseen murderous enemy, could still end his life.

Many of these attitudes were linked to an unwritten code of chivalry and skill for the traditional battle. Sniper practices were in sharp contrast to this code. The bayonet charge was a specific example that maintained the perceived code of honor. As Bourke argues, “bayonet fighting could be conceived as bringing back the ‘barbaric nobility of war.’”¹⁷ Warriors “were seen as exemplifying certain chivalrous codes (or recognized formalities, ceremonies, and courtesies) involving honorable exchange, compassion, and altruism at the same time as invoking reckless adventure and a high-minded disdain of death.”¹⁸ These perceptions of the romanticism of war, coupled with the expected chivalry of exposing oneself to harm as one is trying to inflict death went against the established sniper doctrine of concealment and stealth.

From 1941 until the end of the Vietnam War, snipers and the United States entered a very interesting period in their history. A series of well-publicized wars (World War II, Korea, Vietnam) allowed for snipers

¹⁷ Burke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

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to make their way even more into the public consciousness. Going against positive tactical accomplishments by snipers, cultural representations in the middle of the twentieth century began to become more accessible, and negative. One of the most important was a 1952, Oscar nominated movie called *The Sniper*.

The movie begins with the disconcerting caption, “A word about the picture with follows: High among police problems is that of the sex criminal, responsible last year alone for offences which victimized 31,175 women. Adequate and understanding laws do not exist. Law enforcement is helpless. Here, in terms of one case, is the story of a man whose enemy was womankind.”¹⁹ This film was about a sexual predator in San Francisco who used a M1 Carbine sniper rifle to kill women who had upset him in some way. This social deviant was a civilian, however the message was clear: using an army surplus rifle to shoot with, coupled with the added negativity of a sexual predator loose in one of the biggest cities in the country, this out of control man *turned* into a sniper. Becoming a sniper was depicted as the last rung on the ladder of social deviance. The main character had some attacks of conscience, not wanting to kill but also not being able to control himself. However, the out of control sniper used concealment, accuracy, and a scope to murder women that caused a city wide panic.²⁰ This signified an emotional and personal connection with the victim which fed into the viewer’s aforementioned subconscious fear of voyeurism, this portrayal also allowed the filmmaker to signify that snipers show no real remorse for their actions.

¹⁹ Stanley Kramer, *The Sniper* (Los Angeles, California: Stanley Kramer Productions, 1952), Film.

²⁰ Ibid.

Martin Scorsese recalls seeing this movie as a child, which was screened in New York repeatedly throughout the 1950s. Saying that the film had a “kind of documentary fleckness to it...and a frightening immediacy to it, especially with the serial killer on the loose...a sniper.” Also describing the film as “chilling,” Scorsese likens it to “like watching a film about terrorists. It touched on fears of being unsafe.”²¹ This horror film was shocking on two fronts, first by addressing the issues of sexual predators and voyeurism in the early 1950s, but also by linking them to snipers, thereby criminalizing the figure of the sharpshooter.

The Vietnam War is many things to many different people. To most soldiers who fought there, it was a hellish nightmare of jungle-based guerilla warfare that never seems to end, but to most Americans who were alive during the war, it was the first time they saw battle on television. Mangled bodies of sons and brothers returning home from a foreign place shifted political and popular views about warfare that are still very prevalent in America today. Through this difficult time in American history the war was unpopular, but afterwards, stories of heroism and the daring intrigue of snipers have filled American living rooms and bookshelves, raising public awareness of the job of the military sniper.

To Carlos Norman Hathcock, II the Vietnam War was one thing; it was a chance to do his duty. Signed into the Marine Corp at his request by his mother on his seventeenth birthday, Hathcock became, by far, the most famous sniper to come out of the era and also the most famous American military sniper who ever lived.²² His exploits have influenced

²¹ Ibid.

²² Charles W. Henderson, *Marine Sniper: 93 Confirmed Kills* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1986), 12.

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public imagination about snipers in a way never before seen. Almost every book written after the war on the subject of snipers contains his name. Nearly every modern movie about snipers contains allusions to his actual accomplishments or experiences. Hathcock has come to represent, to nearly every American, either consciously or subconsciously, what a sniper is and what they do. One reported exploit has become so prevalent in cultural representation that it has become a motif in modern cinema on the subject of snipers. Reportedly Hathcock was assigned to hunt an enemy sniper, and during this engagement he killed the sniper by placing one shot through the other snipers scope.

Testifying to the popularity of this story, and to its influence on popular culture, this single feat has been replayed in many popular movies including or about snipers since the Vietnam War; *Saving Private Ryan* (Tom Hanks, 1998), *Enemy at the Gates* (Jude Law, 2001), *Sniper* (Tom Berenger, 1993), *Shooter* (Mark Wahlberg, 2007), not to mention the countless retellings that exist in compilation books about snipers, novels, television documentaries (History Channel, etc.), prime time crime shows, the Discovery Channel's hit show *Mythbusters* (featured 2 separate times), and others that are too numerous to mention. Note the dispersal of depictions of different wars and even the projection of Hathcock's exploits as reported upon other historical snipers; *Enemy at the Gates* depicts the story of Vassili Zaitzev, a famous Russian sniper during the battle of Stalingrad, but the infamous "scope shot" made it into the movie. These modern representations usually put a different, more positive spin on the job of the sniper but still leave room for the mysticism that has historically existed about them, usually based on shooting prowess. Other acts by Hathcock are also repeated in popular

media and have the same un-conscious effect of defining military snipers to the American public.

Adding to the extensive visual media sources that affect the public perception, a proliferation of books, particularly autobiographies and biographies, have been written on the subject of the modern American military sniper. America's current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have specifically produced contemporary pieces that have been released only years after the snipers deployment has been completed, unlike the Vietnam era books that took some time to be written and released. Four books in particular about American snipers (*Shooter*, a NY Times Bestseller by Jack Coughlin, Casey Kuhlman, and Donald Davis; *Long Rifle*, by Joe LeBleu; *Hogs in the Shadows*, by Milo S. Afong; and *Trigger Men*, by Hans Halberstadt) are very popular, signifying broad acceptance of snipers into popular military history. Add to those the well distributed Hathcock biographies, other popular books about Vietnam-era snipers that are still being produced like *Dead Center* by Ed Kugler and *A Sniper in the Arizona* by John Culbertson, and books about allied snipers like *Sniper One* by Sgt. Dan Mills (British sniper in Iraq), and a virtual media blitz has occurred about a group of warriors that were once shunned, equated with social deviance, and seen as emotionless murderers.²³

²³ Gunnery Sgt. Jack Coughlin, Capt. Casey Kuhlman, and Donald A. Davis, *Shooter: the Autobiography of the Top-Ranked Marine Sniper* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2005); Joe LeBleu, *Long Rifle: A Sniper's Story in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Guilford, Connecticut: The Lyons Press, 2009); Milo S. Afong, *Hogs in the Shadows: Combat Stories from Marine Snipers in Iraq* (New York: The Berkely Publishing Group, 2007); Hans Halberstadt, *Trigger Men: Shadow Team, Spider-Man, The Magnificent Bastards, and the American Combat Sniper* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2008); Ed Kugler, *Dead Center: A Marine Sniper's Two-Year Odyssey in the Vietnam War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999); John J. Culbertson, *A Sniper in the Arizona: 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, in the Arizona Territory, 1967* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999); Sgt. Dan Mills, *Sniper One: On Scope and Under Siege with a Sniper Team in Iraq* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2007).

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Further evidence of the heightened awareness of snipers is the fact that in the public arena, many have taken up long-range shooting in an attempt to imitate the accuracy obtained by these mythical soldiers. While not focusing on the actual human targets that sniper's have to engage, these civilian shooters choose to focus on harmless paper or steel targets, just at extreme distances. Firearm advocacy groups like the National Rifle Association sponsor area shoots monthly in various disciplines. They have included a high-power rifle division that is growing in popularity and is open to the public; it is advertised monthly in their periodicals.²⁴

Regardless of the public awareness, the official embrace by the military, and the extensive media coverage about snipers, an uncertain attitude still remains in the public consciousness, and even within the military. In an August 6, 2002 article in the *Washington Post*, Steve Vogel takes the public into the Marine sniper schools training at Quantico, VA. Vogel reports,

*Marine snipers, firing M-40 sniper rifles...can make a clean kill from 1,000 yards in a way that a laser-guided bomb, an armored column or a missile fired by an unmanned aerial vehicle cannot. "There's always that need to limit collateral damage," said Capt. Jonathan Bradley, the officer in charge of the school. "We don't want CNN reporting that we leveled villages. That's not advantageous. Snipers do provide a precision capability." Still, even in some military circles, snipers are outcasts. . . . "A lot of people say: 'Oh, that's dirty warfare. Come out and fight like a man. It taps into something that's very old and very deep in all of us, males in particular, and that's the ability to sneak up on something unseen and deliver a life-taking blow. That's just about as old as time, with the hunter-gatherers."*²⁵

²⁴ *American Rifleman*, "Area Shoots," July 2010, 66.

²⁵ Steve Vogel, "Stealthy, Imperturbable, Disciplined—and Lethal: Marine Snipers Know They'll Always Be Needed in War," *Washington Post*, August 6, 2002.

Based on the training, concealment ability, and the almost super-human ability to shoot at extreme distances, the sniper has remained, much like his military ancestors, an ambiguous figure that stirs feelings of awe and brings to the forefront questions of honor and just war.

In conclusion, while the military sniper has evolved over the last 150 years, public perception seems to have remained mostly unchanged. Awareness is undoubtedly increased though extensive media coverage, however apprehension is still present. The public uncertainty toward snipers continues due to the nature of the battles they fight. Without endangering themselves, snipers still bring to the forefront questions of honor and just warfare based on a “panoptic” fear. Improvements in rifle technology have allowed for the sniper to hit targets in excess of 2,000 yards, adding to the public fascination. This technology has inspired some to attempt to mimic them; however, questions about their motives and ethical deployment remain. As war continues to evolve into an increasingly technological endeavor, the sniper, with his ability to limit collateral damage and remarkable precision-strike capability is seemingly a permanent fixture in the American military and will continue to inspire awe and fear both in the military and in the public imagination.

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