

The Unblinking Eye

Documenting the post-9/11 wars

by Maj Benjamin Van Horrick

Tom Junod, Dexter Filkins, Michael Hastings, and C. J. Chivers forced readers to confront the post-9/11 wars. Junod's humane, delicate treatment of a most intimate image from 9/11—a man jumping to his death—set the standard for confronting the most uncomfortable events that would follow. Filkins immersed himself in the conflict, capturing its disorienting texture and discordant atmospherics. Hastings' bold reporting and razor-sharp prose trained his readers' attention on a general and his staff attempting to save a war. Chivers focused on fighters at the tactical edge battling an enemy and the mechanics of the conflict. Each with a distinctive style and subject matter, the four writers fashioned a mosaic capturing the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Although they wrote at different times and covered different beats, each narrowed their aperture on the most uncomfortable aspects of the GWOT.

When Junod saw Richard Drew's picture of "The Falling Man" on the morning of 12 September in *The New York Times*, the writer knew immediately he would write a story on the image. The identity of the Falling Man evolved into an inquiry into America's psyche following 9/11. Junod deduced the Falling Man was likely Jonathan Briley. However, his identity became secondary to the emotions the image evoked in its viewers. Junod's elegant treatment of the Falling Man addresses the suppressed, discordant feelings 9/11 aroused.¹ These uncomfortable emotions—guilt, grief, fear, anger—then became commonplace during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The piece ends with a collapsing distance: one man falling, one war without an end.

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One of the most famous photographs in human history became an unmarked grave, and the man buried inside its frame—the Falling Man—became the Unknown Soldier in a war whose end we have not yet seen. Richard Drew's photograph is all we know of him, and yet all we know of him becomes a measure of what we know of ourselves.

The picture is his cenotaph, and like the monuments dedicated to the memory of unknown soldiers everywhere, it asks that we look at it, and make one simple acknowledgment: that we have known who the Falling Man is all along.

Dexter Filkins reported from Lower Manhattan on the day the Twin Towers fell. Three years later, he documented the siege of Fallujah in November 2004. In between, Filkins established the *New York Times* Baghdad bureau. By day, he documented military operations. At night, Filkins ran through Baghdad, capturing the cadence of a city.² The double vision made his reporting singular.

In the final pages of *The Forever War*, Filkins likens himself to Laika, the Soviet dog who first orbited the Earth.³ Much like Laika, Filkins sent dispatches back to an interested, yet largely detached, public. The separation and estrangement from America led to Filkins's immersion in the conflicts, proving his insights in Iraq and Afghanistan while fragmenting his

mind and narrowing his horizons. Following the embeds, Filkins describes how the war "flattened" his life, leaving his life in America "silent and slow and heavy and dead." He writes, "I fared better than many of the people I wrote about in this book; yet even so, over the course of the events depicted here, I lost the person I cared for most. The war didn't get her; it got me." This vantage point reveals two wars: the one in Iraq, and one waged on Filkins.

Michael Hastings came of age chronicling the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where a personal tragedy propelled his dogged reporting and razor-sharp prose. In the process, Hastings lost his fiancée in a Baghdad bombing, upending his life.⁴ An open critic of the wars, Hastings hearkened back to the tough, critical reporting of David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan during the Vietnam War. With a dash of Hunter S. Thompson's electric prose, Hastings' writing pulsed with a manic energy. In a C-SPAN *Booknotes* interview, Hastings turned his ire toward his fellow war reporters George Packer and Filkins for their close relationship with the U.S. military, gaining access and in return—in Hastings' view—penning favorable coverage of the wars.⁵

By 2010, Hastings's critical, often sardonic writing served as an indictment of the press coverage of the wars as much as it shed light on the general and his staff. Breathless profiles of generals and the practice of embedding reporters with troops, Hastings argued, placed journalists too close to their subjects and compromised coverage. His institutional criticism thus focused on both the conduct of the war and the press that was supposed to hold it to account.

Evan Wright, the author of *Generation Kill*, became an inspiration

for Hastings.⁶ Rather than profiling junior enlisted in firefights, Hastings set his sights on senior military leaders managing a war and satisfying civilian leaders. Hastings' profile of GEN Stanley McChrystal, then commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, ended the general's career and pulled back the curtain on the cadre of officers running the Afghan War.⁷ Hastings dubbed this cadre "The Operators," later the title of his book.⁸ Nine years into the Afghan war, this cadre knew only the endless cycle of deployments complete with their intoxicating excitement, breakneck pace, and high stakes. It was the same type of life Hastings led, bouncing from war zone to war zone, on assignment, battling military bureaucracy while racing deadlines. The former ran the wars; the latter documented the wars. The wars consumed them both.

Unlike Hastings, who looked up and out, C.J. Chivers looked down and in. A former Marine infantry officer, Chivers guided readers with his intimate knowledge of weapons and tactics. That knowledge allowed Chivers to examine the mechanisms of war and the men who employed those instruments. His reporting, written and video, depicts the hidden—yet essential—mechanics of fighting. In one video, a brand-new platoon leader struggles to gain the trust of local Afghan civilians in the Korengal.⁹ During the clearing of Marjah, a squad leader maneuvers his squad to a position of advantage and calls in an airstrike.¹⁰ The errant airstrike—no fault of the squad leader—results in civilian casualties. These seemingly mundane actions, presented with restraint, show how war remains a series of human decisions, despite technological advances.

On the home front, Chivers' deft, precise writing profiled a Marine struggling with PTSD while caught in the processes and procedures of the criminal justice system and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Sam Siatta distinguished himself as a designated marksman in Helmand, but upon his discharge, his life crumbled.¹¹ One night, in a drunken haze, Siatta mistakenly entered a house. A fight ensued, with

Siatta being stabbed repeatedly. Chivers first meets Siatta at a correctional facility, where he is serving a five-year sentence. Veterans assist Siatta with his release, reentry, and treatment to address his underlying PTSD.

What sets apart Chivers' reporting and writing is his cool, clinical portrayal of institutions—the Marine Corps, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the courts. Each operates according to its own logic, mechanisms, and cadence, often discounting the individual in service of the collective. The sparse depiction of these institutions amplifies the plight of the individual fighter. By telescoping onto an individual small-unit leader while keeping the external pressures in the foreground, Chivers sharpens and clarifies the depiction, giving the reader an appreciation and empathy for those battling on the front lines and struggling on the home front.

Junod, Filkins, Hastings, and Chivers filled a void during the post-9/11 wars. Their eyes and words forced readers to confront the uncomfortable and unforgettable events of 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the present media environment, conflict reporting competes against an endless roster of content creators, open-source intelligence feeds, and a creeping wave of machine-generated media. The new voices and slick, shallow AI products could crowd out conflict reporting. The need and desire for detailed reporting remain, not just to fill pages but to record how conflict alters countries, combatants, and civilians. Clear, vivid, literate war reporting punctuates the noise of algorithms, remaining an unblinking, unflinching eye.

Notes

1. Tom Junod, "The Falling Man," *Esquire*, September 9, 2021. <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a48031/the-falling-man-tom-junod>.

2. Dexter Filkins, "The Forever War," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 24, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/24/magazine/24filkins-t.html>.

3. Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

4. Michael Hastings, *I Lost My Love in Baghdad: A Modern War Story* (New York: Scribner, 2008).

5. Michael Hastings, interview by Brian Lamb, Q&A, C-SPAN, January 29, 2012, video, <https://www.c-span.org/program/qa/michael-hastings/268364>.

6. Hastings, interview.

7. Michael Hastings, "The Runaway General," *Rolling Stone*, June 22, 2010. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-runaway-general-the-profile-that-brought-down-mcchrystal-192609>.

8. Michael Hastings, *The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: Plume, 2012).

9. *The New York Times*, "World: A Soldier's Dilemma in Afghanistan," YouTube video, June 10, 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2bgpvZ7SkI>.

10. *The New York Times*, "World: The Inches That Matter," YouTube video, April 20, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frTNEoCHreE&t=152s>.

11. C.J. Chivers, "The Fighter," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 28, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/28/magazine/afghanistan-soldier-ptsd-the-fighter.html>.

