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Satirizing the Entrepreneurial Way of War: Phil Klay's Short Story *Money as a Weapons System*

Abstract
The paper focuses on the satirical rendition of "the entrepreneurial way of war," an aspect of the American involvement in Iraq (2003–2011) that has not been widely represented in war fiction to appear from the conflict. This is the strategy of employing money as a "weapons system" in the process of reconstructing Iraq in an attempt to "win the hearts and minds" of the local population and to help introduce a democratic system of rule and establish a market economy after the disintegration of the Ba'athist regime. Set in war-ridden Iraq, Phil Klay's darkly comic short story offers a personal narrative of ambition to help mediate normalcy in human relations during a global crisis. While satirizing bureaucratic and military ineptitude it foregrounds the importance of personal integrity in a world gone mad.

Keywords: Phil Klay, *Redeployment*, Money as a weapons system, Iraq, American war fiction

Introduction

Recently, Phil Klay has emerged as one of the distinctive voices within American veteran writers' circles. After joining the Marine Corps in 2005, he served thirteen months in Iraq in 2007 and 2008. Much of the setting in his debut short-story collection, *Redeployment*, comes from his first–hand experience of the Iraqi war. Though not directly participating in combat, as a Public Affairs officer he witnessed the gruesome scenery of their aftermath. *Redeployment* was published in 2014 and won him the National Book Award. It is a collection of twelve short stories with time-setting during the US intervention in Iraq. The protagonists are depicted either in Iraqi war zones or back in America after redeployment. Narrators vary from grunts and veterans to chaplains, reconstruction officers, and lawyers. What they share is the traumatic experience of war-ridden Iraq and the struggle not only to make meaning out of it but to convey it to an apathetic and negligent American public. His second book, a novel, *Missionaries* (2020), sheds light on the American military ventures overseas and the struggle of Colombia toward peace and democracy in the 21st century. Klay creates a genuine South American novel with lived experiences of Colombian characters. He has been praised for his profound insight into the precariousness and complexities of an interconnected global order. Klay's latest published

book *Uncertain Ground: Citizenship in an Age of Endless, Invisible War* (2022) is a collection of nonfiction writings in essay form written over a decade. It poignantly poses the question of the notion of citizenship in an era of endless, yet distant and invisible conflicts of the post-9/11 world and the moral blind spot created by the deep rift between civilian and military life in America.

Context, Title, and Sources of the Short Story

Money is my most important ammunition in this war.
Military General David Petraeus, 101st Airborne Division Air Assault[1]

"Money as a Weapons System" is the sixth story in *Redeployment*. The short story's title is directly loaned from a military handbook meant to assist "company-, battalion-, and brigade-level officers and noncommissioned officers to effectively use money as a weapons system on the counterinsurgency (COIN) battlefield."[2] As Emily Gilbert explains: "in US counterinsurgency doctrine, money has been characterized as "ammunition" and as a "weapons system" [that has been] wielded to win over the "hearts and minds" of the population and to protect the lives of the occupying forces"[3]. This means that soldiers in the war zone are entrusted with the additional responsibility of distributing and spending money on projects concerning reconstruction and development. The "Money as a Weapons System" (MAAWS) policy was funded through the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) introduced in Iraq in 2003 and in Afghanistan in 2004. The US military spent billions of dollars in both countries on a wide range of projects like infrastructure development, building schools, and microfinancing small enterprises in the services or agriculture. Since it does not replace but coexists with conflict and violence, this doctrine rethinks economic development not just as a part of post-conflict reconstruction to follow conventional warfare but furthermore as a form of combat strategy. Using money as a "weapons system" means both "a different kind of military and a different kind of war," namely "the entrepreneurial way of war"[4].

Since the reconstruction of Iraq was an attempt at nation-building unparalleled in scale in history, "dwarfing in cost, size, and complexity" the after-WWII rebuilding of Germany and Japan,[5] apart from the Army, the State Department and

[1] *Commander's Guide to Money as a Weapons System – Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures.* Handbook No. 09–27 Paperback – November 2, 2012, authored by U.S. Army Combined Arms Center and the Center for Army Lessons Learned, Kristine Bell (Ed.). Web. https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA597458.pdf

[2] Ibid.

[3] Emily Gilbert (2015) *Money as a "weapons system" and the entrepreneurial way of war*, *Critical Military Studies*, 1:3, 202–219,

[4] Ibid.

[5] Van Buren, Peter. *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People,* 2012

several other smaller agencies were actively involved in the effort. The State Department operations were financed through USAID and the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund (IRRF). It recruited many career diplomats as Foreign Service Officers to head the embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams (ePRT) with contractors to boost the effort in Iraq and Afghanistan. The teams were "embedded" because they were positioned on military Forward Operation Bases (FOB). In essence, these "civilians" lived, ate, and slept with the regular soldiers on the base and were subject to the same threats as occasional mortar shelling or an IED blast on convoys outside "the wire."

The short story's major source of inspiration is Peter Van Buren's memoir *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People*, (2012), a bitterly sarcastic rendition of the career diplomat's yearlong experience as a leader of two ePRTs in Iraq. With morbid humor, Van Buren tells a story of inadequate planning, pointless projects, and oblivious administrators. He records his encounters with bureaucratic ineptitude, overburdened soldiers, and the constant struggle with corruption and mismanagement. Depicted is the quixotic futility of restoring normalcy in the chaotic socio-political setting of reconstructing Iraq wasting billions of US taxpayers' money on the go. "We lacked a lot of things in Iraq," remarks Van Buren caustically," flush toilets, fresh vegetables, the comfort of family members nearby, and of course adult supervision, strategic guidance, and common sense. Like Guns N' Roses' budget for meth after a new hit, the one thing we did not lack was money. There was money everywhere […] You couldn't walk around a corner without stumbling over bales of money; the place was lousy with it." [6]

Klay makes extensive use of Van Buren's memoir directly incorporating in his text many elements like some of the absurd projects described (the widow bee-keeping one), meetings with corrupt local power brokers (Sheikh Abu Bakr), the character of the translator ("the Professor"), or the peculiar cultural phenomenon of "temporal marriages" in Iran – the way of circumventing Islam's ban on prostitution, to mention a few. He also parodies the policy of "sports diplomacy," only replacing soccer with baseball. The parody of military bureaucracy and ineptitude aligns Klay's darkly comic story with classics in the genre like Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and *Fobbit* by David Abrams.

The Story

"Wars are nothing, in the end, but stories."
Frederick Busch, *The Night Inspector*[7]

[6] "A soldier recalled unloading pallets of new US hundred-dollar bills, millions of dollars flushing out of the belly of a C-130 cargo aircraft to be picked up off the runway by forklifts (operated by soldiers who would make less in their lifetimes than what was on their skids at that moment)." (Buren, *We Meant Well*)

[7] David Abrams uses the quotation as an epigraph to *Fobbit.*

Money as a Weapons System is narrated in past tense from a first-person singular point of view. The narrator, Nathan, is a Foreign Service officer. He arrives in Iraq in 2008 to head an "embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team"; (ePRT) in Camp Taji, North of Bagdad. He does not support the war in the Middle East but believes in public service. He is aware that the reconstruction of Iraq up to then is a controversial endeavor with no visible signs of progress made. However, he knows that success in Iraq is inevitably "a matter of perspective" (Klay 2015: 77). Changing global settings requires flexibility and adaptation of strategies. Reconstruction and rebuilding necessitate new ways of military involvement in the Middle East. He remembers a statement by a senior politician, the former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, "We don't need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten"[8]. Rice referred to American involvement in Kosovo and advocated a policy of non-military participation in carrying out civilian or police functions in the conflict zone. This might have been American policy before 9/11, however, it radically changed after the terrorist attack. In the story's opening paragraph, the narrator comments ironically that in the 2008 setting "the 82nd was building greenhouses near Tikrit" (Klay 2015: 77).

Initially, Nathan worries about his competence and experience with redevelopment, which amounts to "a few college summers in Alabama" where he volunteered with an NGO. Soon he will discover that his "team" is even less experienced. Bob, a former military, totally lacks commitment and has signed up for the mission as a "lark," "straight off the résumé," without even an interview or a physical test, which he would have failed because of his heart murmur. Nathan ironically comments that Bob has "an existential view" of the war in Iraq: "we were fighting in Iraq, because we were fighting in Iraq" and satirizes Bob's ineptitude by alluding to Tennyson's *The charge of the light brigade*: "His was not to reason why, his was but to receive a $250,000 salary with three paid vacations and little expectation of tangible accomplishments" (Klay 2015: 78). Bob is working on a small ludicrous project involving teaching widows to raise bees. He explains to the narrator that the Embassy wants complete projects that would support the Lines of Engagement (LOE): "Give someone a job. That's economic improvement. Give women a job. That's women's empowerment. Give a widow a job. That's aiding disenfranchised population. Three LOE's in one project. Widow projects are gold." (Klay 2015: 82)[9]

The other member of the narrator's team, Cindy, is Bob's exact opposite. Bob characterizes her as an idealistic and enthusiastic former school-board member from mid-western states, "Kansas or Idaho": "…a true believer […] fighting

[8] Condoleezza Rice, quoted in *The New York Times*, 21st October 2000.

[9] In Van Buren's memoir the same goals foisted by the Embassy on the PRTs are called Lines of Effort. By changing effort" to engagement" Klay highlights Bob's military background.

the fight of good versus evil. Democracy versus Islam. All that Sunday school shit. Careful with her" (Klay 2015: 78). She handles the women's business association and is engaged in starting an agricultural project for widows. Though willing to help and to serve, just like Bob, she is inexperienced. She lacks any experience with farming and googles to inform herself, presenting random, curious but useless facts, e.g. "There's two hundred fifty squirts in a gallon of milk!" (Klay 2015: 79).

Another contractor, supposed to be the third member of his team is absent. Nathan is informed that he was very badly injured on the very first day of his arrival. Upon hearing this Nathan plunges eerily into a thoughtful consideration of the grim realities of a war zone, with its inevitability of immanent death and mutilation. In a comic twist however, he is told that having been flown to Taji in a Black Hawk, the contractor jumped out of the helicopter "action-movie style" as if running for cover from machine-gun fire and broke his ankle with his "very first step" (Klay 2015: 79).

The two valuable projects, in the sense of being of most help to the locals that Nathan identifies immediately, are the women's health clinic and the water treatment plant. The clinic was recently opened with Cindy's Women's Business Association support and quickly became indispensable for women in the area. The problem, however, is that the money for it will run out next month. Neither the Iraqi administration nor the American Embassy considers it an applicable project for IRRF2 (Iraqi Relief and Reconstruction Fund) money. In the patriarchal Arabic culture, women are not seen as needing specific health care and the corresponding facilities. The American reluctance to adopt the project is that it does not comply directly with the main objective of the whole operation – to reorganize the Iraqi political and economic sector along democratic and free market principles. Funding goes primarily to projects creating employment opportunities.

The other viable project for Nathan is the water treatment plant. It is important because farming in the region depends entirely on irrigation. The plant had already sunk $1,5 million, however, it is still not operational. Nathan wants to meet Kazemi, the local engineer in charge of the plant to revitalize the project. Kazemi's characterization is based on stereotypical assumptions of Oriental tardiness. After failing to contact him for three weeks on the phone, the narrator loses another three weeks to schedule a meeting with the chief engineer. He comments irritably: "Kazemi had an annoying habit of answering questions about dates and times the way a Zen master answers questions about enlightenment. "Only the mountains do not meet," he'd say, or, "The provisions for tomorrow belong to tomorrow" (Klay 2015: 83).

There are two major problems with revitalizing the water-pumping project. First, the built pipelines are for the wrong pressure, and the second one is that the pumped water would go for irrigation of the Sunni farms, while the current Min-

ister of Agriculture is from the Shi'a quota.[10] To succeed, Nathan has to negotiate not only with the local authorities but also with his superiors in the Brigade and the American Embassy. In this negotiation process, he is assisted by two mediators: the "Professor" – his Iraqi interpreter, and Major Zima, his military counterpart, the Brigade's Public Affairs Officer.

The professor is a reluctant translator. He is described as a "short and pudgy" Sunni Muslim, who makes no bones about his dislike of what Americans had done to his country: "I was a professor before you came and destroyed this country" (Klay 2015: 85). He is witty, and intelligent, with the inevitable steel-rimmed glasses. When everybody in the convoy from JSS (Joint Security Station) Istalquaal[11] is nervous or scared, he looks simply bored. He never misses the chance to bite back and mock the Americans' lack of linguistic and intercultural competence: "Istalquaal," I finally said, trying to draw him out. "Does it mean freedom, or liberation?" He opened his eyes a crack and looked at me sidelong. Istalquaal? *Istiqlal* means independence," he said. "Istalquaal means nothing. It means Americans can't speak Arabic." (Klay 2015: 86)

Yet, the Professor is really helpful. He is not translating mechanically from one language to another. He is always in full control of the mediation process and an active agent in it: he analyses and filters the linguistic data received from one party of the communication process before interpreting it to the party operating with a different language system. He comments on the behavior, characters, and intentions of the negotiating parties. When the narrator first meets the water-treatment plant chief engineer, the professor listens to Kazemi's ten-minute introductory talk in Arabic, just nodding, without translating a single word. Finally, he informs Nathan: "He greets you, and wants to take you to his office" (Klay 2015: 87). Later in the conversation, the professor would use phrases like, 'he wants you to believe…" so and so, instead of simply translating, thus adding an evaluation of the intended message spoken (Klay 2015: 88). And finally, he would directly tell Nathan that he does not think Kazemi a very intelligent man, thus assessing not only the message content and intent but the reliability of the agent, sending the message, himself.

> "I hate you more than I have ever hated you right now," the Professor said, rubbing his glasses hard enough that I thought they might break.
> "Why do you even work for us? I said.
> "Forty. Dollars. A day."
> "Nonsense," I said. "You are risking your life for us."

[10] After the fall of Saddam's Ba'ath Party regime and the disintegration of totalitarian control, the antagonistic Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslim factions in Iraq plunged into a bloody civil war. The American forces established a quota based government with distribution of ministerial positions to warring parties and tribes.

[11] As Bob had informed Nathan earlier, the Americans named the JSS "Istalquaal" on the incorrect assumption that it translates as "freedom" or "liberation."

> He sized me up for a second. "There was hope at the beginning," he said. His face softened a bit. "Even without hope, you must try." I smiled. Eventually, he smiled back." (Klay 2015: 117)

The professor is torn between his conviction that the Americans have "baked Iraq like a cake and given it to Iran to eat," on the one hand and his belief that the only way to contribute to the restoration of his country is to cooperate with the Americans on the other. It's not a matter of conflicting loyalties for him, but a matter of coping with the absurdity of his positioning in a kind of a "No-Man's land." Here, I use "no man's land" as an apt military equivalent of the imaginary psychological state of being in "a space in-between" in the sense that Delabastita uses it to define one of the "affective components" translators exhibit in fictional representations. For Delabastita this identity crisis derives from translators' inability to "prevent the permanent oscillations of empathy and sympathy, the never-ending switching and adjusting to other parties, from fragmenting, eroding or dislocating their sense of self, leaving them in a space 'in-between'?" (2011: 111–112).

Each time the "Professor" is on an interpreting mission, whether with a convoy or in the camp, he is risking his life. He may be bombed or shot at. Working for the Americans puts him at risk of being killed by the Iraqis. It's an existential crisis similar to the one Billy Pilgrim would experience as a POW, being saved by the Germans from the American bombs in Dresden during the WWII setting of *Slaughterhouse-5*. However, unlike Vonnegut's protagonist, the professor does not view resignation as an option.

Nathan's most valuable ally in his quest to revitalize the water treatment plant the women's clinic projects is his military counterpart, Major Jason Zima. The leader of the Brigades Civil Affairs Company is a caricature of a soldier. He has the physical appearance and the idiotic smile of the Good Soldier Švejk, combined with the aptitude for calisthenics of Yossarian's instructor, Rogoff, and with the master-mind plotting and scheming skills of a Milo Minderbinder.[12] As his name, Jason, implies he is a trickster. "He was a stocky man with a bizarrely spherical head that he shaved to a smooth shine each morning. It gave him the appearance, […] of a lovingly polished bowling ball resting on a sack of grain. […] In all my interactions with him so far, he had projected an idiocy so pure it boggled the mind" (Klay 2015: 92).

Despite his deceptive appearance of a vaudeville comedian, he has a reputation of a man who completes his projects. His ever-optimistic, reassuring dictum is

[12] The chapter with Yossarian's physical education instructor, Staff Sergeant Rogoff, was omitted in the original publication of *Catch-22* in 1961 as the editors' decision. It was first published in *Playboy, vol 34* in 1987 under the title "Yossarian Survives." It is printed in the collection *Catch as Catch Can: The Collected Stories and Other Writings* in 2003. Rogoff's most memorable dictum is advising the bed-stricken Yossarian "Don't just lie there while you are waiting for the ambulance. Do push-ups."

"I'll handle it" and he always does. In a brilliant maneuver, he helps Nathan receive a green light from the Ministry for the water treatment plant by using the carrot-and-stick tactics. He explains to the Shi'a-controlled ministry that the American-built pipelines will pump water with a pressure that will make the Sunni village toilets explode and then he threatens to block financing for the open market that the minister's cousin was supposed to build for the army if they still block the project. "I wasn't sure if Zima was brilliant or insane," comments Nathan.

Major Zima's skills as an intralingual[13] interpreter are based on his experience with the military bureaucracy. He knows how to manipulate the facts and present them in the best possible light to achieve his goal. When asked if what he claims is true, he says, "Of course it's true. I heard it on a TED Talk," or when facts are doubted, he readily comes up with the excuse that maybe someone gave him bad information. As he says "I deal only in truth-hood." His intralinguistic competencies help Nathan write a report perfectly complying with bureaucratic lingo. He uses language as a weapons system to help him push through the women's health clinic project: "Several promising businesses have failed, despite substantial opportunities for female employment, due to lack of adequate child care and medical facilities. Providing these services is a prerequisite to a flourishing free market and represents a business opportunity in its own right" (Klay 2015: 113). As a master intralingual translator, employing a mixture of rewording, fabrication, and change of perspective, he secures the necessary funding and even additional CERP money for the clinic.

Major Zima also navigates Nathan through the dire straits of bureaucratic and authoritative lunacy. He saves the narrator from the wrath of G. G. Goodwin, the "King of Mattresses of Northern Kansas." The wealthy billionaire, well-connected in Washington, has come up with the "brilliant" idea that Iraqis' strive for Democracy is hamstrung by the absence of proper democratic institutions like…baseball! So, he sends baseball attire to be distributed to local schools for the children to learn to play with. The Embassy sees that as genuinely in line with the "sports diplomacy" policy and gives the green light to the ludicrous project. For the "green-zone" diplomats a few photographs of Iraqi children in baseball uniforms are the perfect photo opps to promote "success" and justify funding. Goodwin's character is a satire of American imperialistic quirky optimism and a total lack of understanding of the Other. The cheerful tone of his letter to Nathan sharply contrasts the gloomy reality the narrator is used to. Reading Goodwin's e-mail is for Nathan like "getting an ice pick to the brain" (Klay 2015: 101). His hasty response throws him into the vortex of being cc'd on a nasty missive to a congressman and a myriad of other military and State big-shots, like the Brigadier General and his Embassy boss. Again, Major

[13] In his "On Linguistic aspects of translation," Roman Jakobson distinguishes between "Interlingual translation" or "translation proper" and "intralingual translation" or "rewording."

Zima comes to the rescue and handles the problem. Nathan agrees to return the favor by always carrying a camera outside the wire chancing for a photo opp. Just like the Professor, Major Zima is disillusioned by the overwhelming absurdity around him, however, unlike the Professor who openly resists it, he tries to grab every chance to beat it, playing by the insane rules of its own game. Major Zima is a hacker *par excellence*. He exploits the vulnerabilities and loopholes in the bureaucratic system and succeeds in helping Nathan.

The short story thematically comments on the notion of "success" seen from two different perspectives: the global one, represented by the State and the military, on the one hand, and the personal one, the individual motivation of each of the characters, on the other. For the authorities, "success" is measured quantitively by results achieved and documented. No matter how inefficient, any project completed is considered "successful" if it is reported as such and looks impressive on a PowerPoint presentation or a photo. For Nathan, Major Zima, and the "Professor," "even without hope, you must try to succeed" means to persist in changing the situation for the better, one small step every single day, focusing on what is valuable and practical (the women's clinic). "Things are getting better" Major Zima informs Nathan, compared to "the real madness" two years before, and the narrator realizes that currently even the problems are an "improvement" (Klay 2015: 112).

To mirror the achievement motif, Klay structures the story around the notion of "success." It is the first and the last to appear in the text. The story opens with Nathan's remark "Success was a matter of perspective" (Klay 2015: 77) and ends with the Professor's ironic comment on Nathan's finally taking a clear photo of Iraqi children pretending to play baseball: "There you are…Success" (Klay 2015: 117). The word appears also in G. G. Goodwin's ludicrous e-mail to Nathan as a shouted-out absurdist formula of entrepreneurial achievement: "SUCCESS = DRIVE + DETERMINATION + MATTRESSES" (Klay 2015: 101). Thus, Klay offers his minor story of moderate "success" pitched against Van Buren's "grand narrative" of failure.

Conclusion

Money as a Weapons System is a darkly comic story. It is hilariously funny, and Helleresque in tone with all its caricature characters and vaudevillian ambiance reminiscent of *Catch-22*. It is directly based on Peter Van Buren's memoir. The difference between the two texts consists in their attitude and focus. Klay's tragico-comic story, though bitterly ironic, is not as scathingly sarcastic as Buren's. Besides, Buren, a career diplomat, is more interested in attacking the ineptitude of the state and the military, while Klay, though critical of the inadequate policies, focuses on the efforts of the ordinary participants in the madness, not the abstract power entities (like the state or the military) exerting control. Klay hails the "little hero," the one that does

his best to outplay the bureaucratic machinery and for whom "success" is to make even a small contribution to improving the lives of others.

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