



# New Media Review: *What I Want You to Know*

NEW MEDIA REVIEW

ANDREW I. REPP 

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## ABSTRACT

The recent withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan has renewed questioning about the justification and merits of the 20-year Global War on Terror. This article reviews *What I Want You to Know*, a timely new documentary that provides a cathartic space for 13 American combat veterans to address such questions. In less than 90 minutes, veterans deconstruct years of political deceptions against the backdrop of traumatic overseas experiences. The documentary's strengths include its elevation of veteran voices, as well as its utility as an instrument of critical consciousness that challenges the political contexts for war. Limitations include the need for greater diversity of participants from additional military branches, ranks, and sociodemographic backgrounds, as well as the need for greater attention to resources for the transition home. Despite these issues, this film will appeal to war documentary enthusiasts and academics alike. It will prove particularly useful as a pedagogical tool in the classroom for university departments with coursework related to the study of moral injury and military-connected populations.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Andrew I. Repp

St. Ambrose University, US  
[reppandrew@sau.edu](mailto:reppandrew@sau.edu)

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On August 31, 2021, US President Joe Biden (2021) announced the end of the nation's involvement in "the longest war in American history" (para. 1). The withdrawal of US military forces from Afghanistan represented a turning point in the nation's 20-year Global War on Terror. However, the operation was beset by a series of challenges. In the weeks leading up to the announcement, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani fled the country, the Afghan National Security Forces surrendered to the Taliban, and the Islamic State in Khorasan orchestrated a fatal attack at the Kabul International Airport (US Department of State, 2022). These outcomes resurrected longstanding questions about the broader Post 9/11 war effort, which has directly claimed up to 940,000 military and civilian lives (Watson Institute, 2023), adversely affected the physical and mental well-being of countless survivors (Cypel et al., 2023; Seal et al., 2007), and cost US taxpayers more than \$8 trillion over 2 decades (Crawford, 2021). Was it worth it? Were leaders transparent? Was the mission just?

These questions are among the many confronted in Catie Foertsch's (2023) directorial debut, *What I Want You to Know*. In less than 90 minutes, the documentary presents the often-overlooked perspectives of 13 American veterans, who critically reflect on their lived experiences in post 9/11 warzones. Interspersed with frequent cuts to raw wartime photos and videos, the film transports viewers in a right-seat-ride alongside veterans as they recount a shared quest for truth and justice in the backdrop of traumatic overseas experiences. Early on, participants describe an unflinching sense of pride in joining the military in response to political narratives about the mission to defend the nation's core democratic freedoms in the wake of 9/11. This conviction is soon tempered by contrary realities on the ground overseas. After years of deception from leadership, the veterans experience moral injury—a sense of betrayal and shame resulting from violations of morally and ethically just conduct (Shay, 2014). Once home, the veterans struggle to find hope for moral repair. The film concludes by urging Americans to act as engaged citizens to help ensure government accountability and prevent unnecessary warfare in the future.

One of the documentary's strengths lies in the vision of its two executive producers, Travis Weiner and Tommy Furlong, who are both featured combat veterans. The pair envisioned the film as a response to "civilians and government officials who referred to them as heroes but wouldn't listen to their experiences and feelings about the wars they fought" (Meatgrinder Films, n.d., para. 1). Thus, *What I Want You to Know* serves as a cathartic space for similarly situated veterans to share their unfiltered assessments about deployments in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Their

honest reflections often involve visceral critiques of political leaders and their associated policies, which are courageous given service members' traditional deference to the mission and chain of command (Atuel & Castro, 2018).

The film's firsthand narratives and warzone footage enable viewers to accompany veterans as they gradually discover harsh truths about misrepresentations from leadership. For example, political narratives were initially spun to assure citizens that the war was being fought to "defend not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear" (Bush, 2001, para. 10). Americans were informed that oppressed Afghan and—later—Iraqi citizens welcomed the nation's interventions. Yet, interactions with local citizens soon exposed the fallacy. As one veteran explained:

My unit was in Baghdad ... we had a neighborhood that we patrolled and it was always very positive interactions with the local citizens. There was one time that we were out on patrol and a man—we were going through the neighborhood—and he came up to us in English, and was like, "Why are you here? We didn't ask you to be here. We don't want you here." And that was the first time that it was verbalized to me—now that was my experience and I'm sure that, you know, others had varying levels of experience—but we always felt welcome by the folks that we interacted with until that one time. And I think that was a moment for me to really begin questioning. Because here and there, like, oh you know, this is kind of crazy that we're here, that we're doing this, and it doesn't necessarily seem to be working. (Ball as cited in Foertsch, 2023, 10:09)

Questioning turned to frustration when misleading statements became outright fallacies. This was the case with at least one premise for Operation Iraqi Freedom, which involved Iraq's purported weapons of mass destruction (Powell, 2003). Initially, the narrative was accepted by deployed service members. As one veteran suggested, "In the beginning, there was a hope that maybe there were some weapons of mass destruction" (Cueva as cited in Foertsch, 2023, 27:20). However, time brought revelations, anger, and a deep sense of moral injury:

We didn't find any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. We learned that the 9/11 connections to Iraq were false. I know that a lot of corporations got rich. I know that our military industrial complex is doing better than ever. The oil companies involved came out excellent. All the groups that were

supplying services and goods were making bank. And my friends and I were sacrificing and dying and I was killing people. I was physically injured. I was mentally injured. I lost my sanity. I lost my innocence. I lost my soul. For what? I was sent there on a fraud. So, I was betrayed by my country. I was betrayed by my government. And I was lied to. And I was told it was an honorable mission. And I was built up to be proud over going on this noble cause. And it was bullshit. And here I am with blood on my hands. For what? For betrayal. So, yeah, I feel betrayed by my country. (Reppenhagen as cited in Foertsch, 2023, 1:03:53)

Foertsch's (2023) strategic integration of raw wartime imagery to highlight veteran narratives serves as another asset to the film. In an especially challenging scene, a series of photographs depict civilian casualties (1:08:39). The scene begins with a picture of local citizens mourning over body bags in formation on the ground. The image is captioned with statistics from the Watson Institute (2023) estimating the deaths of approximately 46,319 civilians in Afghanistan and as many as 210,038 in Iraq. The slideshow advances slowly as a veteran shares his perspective on the senselessness of these deaths. A final image of a father grieving over a child in an open casket emphasizes these sentiments in dramatic fashion:

Before we went over there, part of the reason—the justification—the big reason, was look how Saddam's killing his own people, whether that was, you know, him attacking the Kurds, killing tens of thousands of Kurds, or just kind of tit for tat killing his dissidents and people in the population, which is a terrible thing. But if we're going over there to try to stop that or prevent that, is it worth it if two or three or four times the amount of people that ever died under him are killed as a result of the invasion? It doesn't seem to make too much sense to me. (Weiner as cited in Foertsch, 2023, 1:09:27)

Scenes such as these provide the viewer with unprecedented access to evidence of the adverse consequences of the nation's conflicting military and nation-building objectives. Over time, service members came to wonder whether they were "creating more reasons for people to attack America because of what we were doing on the ground" (Feinberg as cited in Foertsch, 2023, 43:34). Insurgents and their preferred method of attack—improvised explosive devices—represented a shadowy form of warfare that was difficult to address. Confusion over the nature of the enemy, combined with faulty intelligence, led some US

service members to distrust the local civilian population. This occasionally resulted in indiscriminate killing:

I can't count how many times I've seen women and children shot at or shot. They were just there and folks just rolled through and anything that moved they fired at. It was never the firefights that really haunt me. It's what I've seen humans be able to do to other humans. Those are things that probably bother me most to this day—to see what humans are capable of and how horrible they can be when they're told that, you know, that this other person is less than them. (Pitts as cited in Foertsch, 2023, 1:11:47)

Although the documentary exposes its share of similar atrocities, it also opens the door to the prospect of moral repair. In the end, Americans are urged to participate in the democratic process to prevent these circumstances from recurring. This requires an active form of citizenship that holds elected officials accountable. However, this might not always align with popular opinion:

If folks think it's unpatriotic or unamerican to question our government's decisions on foreign policy or going into war, then you can call me unpatriotic or unamerican. I think it's the most patriotic to do is to question your government, especially a foreign policy or a conflict where we're sending, you know, 18-year-old kids to die or get hurt. I would hope every American citizen would question why we're doing that. (Pitts as cited in Foertsch, 2023, 1:25:28)

For all its virtues, *What I Want You to Know* is not without limitations. First, the film would have benefited from a more diverse sample of participants. For example, the featured veterans were all from the Army or Marine Corps. Although the movie seems to focus on ground operations, the collective dialogue might have been enriched by including veterans from the Air Force or Navy. Similarly, participants from middle-rungs of enlisted and officer cadre were overrepresented. Including a broader range of lower-enlisted and higher-ranking officers might have added depth. Moreover, there was an opportunity to include more sociodemographic diversity in terms of gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. It might also have been interesting to compare competing perspectives from veterans who supported the war. The film could have been strengthened by elaborating on participants' return to civilian life and including information about additional resources for those living with moral injury and related behavioral health issues.

Despite these issues, Foertsch's (2023) work should be welcomed by war documentary enthusiasts and academics alike. It will be especially useful as a pedagogical tool for educators in university settings, perhaps with a disclaimer about the potentially challenging content (e.g., graphic violence, frequent explosions, and allegations of rampant child sexual abuse in Afghanistan). The film will serve to promote dialogue around the concept of moral injury, which has been identified as a critical concern for helping professions like social work and psychology (Reamer, 2022; Sugrue, 2019). It will likely provide equally useful contributions to programs with coursework on military-connected populations. For these reasons, *What I Want You to Know* is highly recommended.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

**Andrew I. Repp**  [orcid.org/0000-0003-0067-2125](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0067-2125)  
St. Ambrose University, US

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