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## The Companies We Keep Book Review

*William March, Company K (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1933). 260 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN: 9780817304805.*

*Phil Klay, Redeployment (New York: The Penguin Press, 2014). 291 pp. \$26.95 (hardcover), ISBN: 9781594204999.*

*"I want it to be a record of every company in every army... With different names and different settings, the men of whom I have written could... be French, German, English or Russian."*

*Pvt. Joseph Delany (March)*

*"You can't describe it to someone who wasn't there, you can hardly remember how it was yourself because it makes so little sense. And to act like somebody could live and fight for months in that shit and not go insane, well, that's what's really crazy."*

*Staff Sgt. Hauptert (Klay)*

unornamented realism. As Philip D. Beidler notes in his introduction to the book:

Here, individual soldiers come relentlessly forward, one after the other, the living and the dead commingled, to offer grim first-person testimony; and in narrative after narrative...one fundamental fact of modern warfare: the fact of violent, ugly, obscene death. Men die of gas, gunshot, grenade...bayonet...disintegrated by high explosive. They commit suicide...murder prisoners...each other. They kill wantonly and at random, at times in error and virtually always against whatever small portion they can recall of their better instincts...they have lost touch with any fact of life save the fact of death's absolute dominion...And the death is never gallant sacrifice...not grand, valorous, brave... it is bowel-ripping...body-rending...the kind that makes men scream for their mothers... dissolve themselves into whimpering wrecks... it is death on the whole vast scale of modern mechanization.

What can public administrators and professors of the discipline possibly learn from reading literary fiction? The answer to this question is elusive and obvious—banal, even. As banal, perhaps, as death in war if we are to heed the myriad fictional voices of William March and Phil Klay, two authors and former U.S. Marines, each first-hand observers of war of a certain degree, some 80 years apart.

In *Company K*, March (1933) presents an inexplicably neglected masterpiece—a formally experimental and emotionally charged book that was a revolutionary event in the history of war literature. It was the first novel to be written by a veteran combatant of the war it depicted (World War I) and among the first—along with certain works by Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and a few others—to depict its subject with unflinching and

March's formal approach is to present the experience of "the Great War" from the first-person point-of-view of individual members of the eponymous Company K—from privates to sergeants and on up to the Lieutenant Colonel. Through these voices, he explores themes of dehumanization, senseless random death, erosion of morality and virtue, and what can be described as an undercurrent of administrative evil<sup>1</sup> that reduces the individual soldier to a malleable commodity whose individual worth is utterly subsumed to notions of patriotism, heroism, and sacrifice that are in practice farcical and meaningless. These themes swirl about what can be thought of as a central scene—one that is first meditated upon in the abstract by the fictive narrator and his wife in the opening chapter and which reverberates throughout the book, eventuating in suicides, insanity, and moral emptiness for those who took part in it. In this scene, the Company captures a group of German

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soldiers deep behind enemy lines where it is difficult and dangerous to transport them to the rear for internment. The captain in charge asks his sergeant what they should do. The sergeant is at a loss, and so the captain ponders aloud: “The easiest thing would be to train a machine gun on the gravel pit.” The sergeant agrees, laughing, thinking it a joke. However, it is no joke. The captain orders the prisoners taken to a nearby ravine where it will be easier to execute them. The sergeant has some anxious moments of internal dialogue and moral anxiety, but, in the end, he falls back on his professional training, reminding himself of the soldier’s imperative to follow without question the orders of a superior officer: “Soldiers ain’t supposed to think...if they could think, they wouldn’t be soldiers.” He then discharges his order “downhill” to the next human link in the chain of command, the corporal. The corporal in turn pushes the order down to the privates in his automatic rifle squad. Although one man balks, drops his rifle, and bolts for the woods, he is eventually caught, court-martialed, and imprisoned. His fellow soldiers exhibit no such breach of professional conduct. The prisoners are executed. Moral logic is suppressed by the logic of war.

Throughout *Company K*, this cold logic renders death a banality, a mindless, ever-present, foregone conclusion, inescapable and empty of meaning for those who witness, cause, and suffer it. As Biedler notes, “their names and their experiences [are] totally absorbed into the dismal roll-call of sacrifices to a whole vast, impassive, war-breeding system...” and the “novel formed...from [this] collocation of individual fragments, becomes a vast, enormous testament to the utter insignificance of individuality in a world of modern, mass-production war.”

Phil Klay’s *Redeployment*—winner of the 2014 National Book Award for fiction—sounds themes and teaches lessons that resonate with and contemporize those laid out in *Company K*. However, while the themes and mode of expression are similar, there are important differences. Like *Company K*, *Redeployment* is a suite of first-person narratives, told from the perspectives of individual soldiers. For Klay, these are an artilleryman, a priest, a Foreign Service officer, and so on, whereas for March, the perspectives are exclusively those of characters in direct combat roles. These differences likely derive from divergences in the authors’ first-person experiences of war, and they carry over in the style in which each author tells his stories. While Klay himself did not serve in a combat role—a fact that separates him from March, who earned the French Croix de Guerre, the Distinguished Service Cross, and the Navy Cross for Valor—he was a U.S. Marine and veteran of the Iraq war who served from 2007 to 2008 as a public affairs officer. From his experiential vantage point, Klay imagines vividly and convincingly how the lives of American soldiers

are fragmented—both literally and figuratively—and otherwise transformed by what one character blithely refers to as “the standard horror of war.”

Where *Company K* is presented as a novel rendered in a rapid-fire succession of vignettes, several lasting no more than a few pages, *Redeployment* is presented as a collection of short stories about different companies deployed in the same theater of war but in a war that differs in kind from World War I, that is, urban and guerilla as opposed to conventional and front-based. What’s more, Klay’s tales are written in the more familiar short-story format where the characters’ internal lives, experiences, and narratives are allowed to breathe. The overall impression of March’s approach is to feed the themes of impersonality and abruptness with which death is dealt by war—form faithfully follows function. Klay’s stories are more cinematic. In them, we are much more privy to the psychological lives of the characters. They are also, of course, told in the voices and vernaculars of contemporary soldiers, which makes them more accessible to today’s reader.

One could spend the page-allotment for several book reviews teasing out the themes at hand as dramatized in *Redeployment*, but, of course, we have no such luxury here. This entire collection of fine stories is well worth reading and will reward those who invest the time with much food for thought, but the story that is perhaps most instructive as a thematic interlocutor to *Company K* is “Prayer in the Furnace.” In this narrative, a marine chaplain tries to help members of his company make sense of the violence and suffering, and the seeming meaninglessness of both, and to make peace with it all. However, as the title implies, his task is difficult; it is potentially impossible. This early passage, which takes place after the chaplain has delivered opening remarks at a service for yet another slain marine, shows what the chaplain is up against.

After the service, Staff Sergeant Hauptert held court in the smoke pit behind the chapel... ‘What do we do?’... ‘We come here, we say, We’ll give you electricity. If you work with us. We’ll fix your sewage system. If you work with us. We’ll provide you security. If you work with us. But...if you fuck with us, you will live in shit. And they’re like, Okay, we’ll live in shit.’ He pointed off to the direction of the city, then swatted with his hand, as if at an insect. ‘Fuck them,’ he said... I retreated back to the chapel.

The service is for a young marine who had been on his first deployment in Iraq. The man, Fujita, had been killed by a sniper while dancing mostly nude on a rooftop and shouting Arabic obscenities to provoke insurgents to engage in combat. The

chaplain learns this from another marine, Rodriguez. Throughout the story, Rodriguez comes to the chaplain to unburden himself about atrocities he and his squad have committed (but to which he never fully confesses). The chaplain also learns the reason behind Fujita's behavior. For some time, company leaders had been tracking the number of firefights each squad had engaged in. Just before the incident, leadership had publicly hazed Fujita and Rodriguez's squad for posting a dip in its firefight numbers, which had regularly been the highest in the company. To improve its numbers the squad had taken to provoking insurgents as Fujita had, resulting in his tragic and farcical death.

Fujita's death and other incidents in the story flesh out the disturbing pattern of leadership conduct that spawned the atrocities Rodriguez wants to confess. As it turns out, from Captain to Lieutenant Colonel, the leaders of Charlie Company have cultivated a culture of aggression and lawlessness. In one scene that the chaplain recounts, the Colonel interrupts a trainer giving a lesson on the proper Escalation of Force to say, "When we shoot, we shoot to kill. Marines do not fire warning shots." Echoing March's captain at the execution of the German prisoners, the trainer is clearly stunned but backs down, respecting the professional code against contradicting a superior officer, "especially in front of his men." When the chaplain finally goes to an officer to report his concerns, the major reveals the depth of the problem: "You think Lieutenant Colonel Fehr will ever become Colonel Fehr if he tells higher; 'Hey, we think we did some war crimes?'"

In sum, like March, Klay illuminates the degradation of moral virtue that is a prominent, if not inevitable, component of war—whatever the epoch or circumstance. Otherwise-decent people convince themselves they are just following orders and shoot unarmed prisoners in a gulch. Otherwise-decent people, over time spent in a warzone, succumb to reflexive reciprocity against all who resemble the Enemy, equating all Iraqis as "hajis," meting out death to civilians, provoking unnecessary deadly engagements to post kills and reward aggression and murder, dehumanizing the enemy to make them easier to kill. Also like March, Klay shows us the human toll that is paid to war long after it is over. Post-war suicides come one after the other in "Prayer in the Furnace" just as they do among the ranks of those who participated in the shooting of the unarmed prisoners in *Company K*. Then there is this, straight from the mouth of the chaplain:

In retrospect, it made sense. The lance corporal's breakdown—his lack of empathy, his anger, his hopelessness—was a natural

reaction. He was an extreme case, but I could see it around me... They're all the same to me. They're all the enemy.

In seminary and after, I'd read... Aquinas. 'The sensitive appetite, though it obeys the reason, yet in a given case can resist by desiring what the reason forbids.' Of course this would happen. Of course it was banal, and of course combat vets... wouldn't really care. Their reaction is understandable, human, and so not a problem. If men inevitably act this way under stress, is it even a sin?

For those of us who have not participated in or even witnessed war—which, in the post-conscription era, is most of us—it is in a sense absurd and immoral to pass judgment on or even plausibly to empathize with those who have.<sup>2</sup> As Hauptert says in "Prayer in the Furnace," "We lived in a place that was totally different from anything those hippies in the audience could possibly understand." However, hippies or not, we public administrators can and must try to understand. We can *learn* from these ironic banalities, these horrific mass human sacrifices, and these war stories. In fact, it is morally incumbent upon us to do so to ensure that they are not empty of meaning. The meaning is morally prophylactic. Wars should not *be*. If be they shall, then be they must only as a last resort, in self-defense, when all possible means of dispute settlement are completely, utterly, and unequivocally exhausted. In short, civic virtue—in the Aristotelian sense<sup>3</sup>—must be valued, modeled, cultivated, and taught.

We began with a question: What can public administrators and professors of the discipline possibly learn from reading literary fiction? Now that we have considered these specific fictions—the one seminal, an opening salvo on the horror and stupidity of modern mechanized warfare, the other its sad postmodern echo in the era of the drone strike—an answer: *they must be taught*. Alongside academic treatments of the issues of moment, alongside the necessary tools of utility, leadership, policy analysis, research design, and management, they must be taught. Underpinned by case studies in ethics and not without benefit of historical sweep, they must be taught. Against the protests of students, if necessary, they must be taught. For they, the students, must be taught. Not placated. Not entertained. Not serviced as customers whose wants must be satisfied. But taught. Please teach them.

Why is this answer banal? Because it is one that has been echoed generation after generation in the aftermath and interstices of war if not in classrooms of public administration then certainly in literature and philosophy. As Burke and Santayana said, those who can't remember the past are condemned to repeat it. By now, this is a platitude, a cliché, a Wikiquote. One

that Kurt Vonnegut, another author of superb war-illuminating fiction, famously lampooned:

We're doomed to repeat the past no matter what. That's what it is to be alive. It's pretty dense kids who haven't figured that out by the time they're ten.... Most kids can't afford to go to Harvard and be misinformed.

When it comes to war, it seems that Vonnegut may have been right. At least partially. For, within a generation after the “Great War” (1914–1918), did we not repeat its dehumanizing atrocities—in fact amplify them by unquantifiable factors of horror in what is now so unequivocally accepted as the “Good War” (1939–1945)? And how long between the moral debacle of “The Good War” and the Korean? Between Korea and Vietnam? Between Vietnam and the Gulf War? Between the Gulf War and Afghanistan and Iraq?

While Vonnegut may have been right about this seemingly eternal recurrence of past folly, I can't quite agree with him about giving up. After all, what is the point of education if we take this cynical view? So,

along with the classic public administration literature, such as that celebrated and republished by *Public Administration Review* in this its 75th anniversary year, sprinkle in *Slaughterhouse Five*. Teach *The Naked and the Dead*, *Catch 22*, and *The Things They Carried*. And, alongside Debra Stone, Lester Salamon, Arthur M. Okun, and Aristotle, let Klay and March be among the companies we keep.

## Notes

1. See Adams and Balfour (2015).
2. For a compelling discussion of the moral complexities of the volunteer model of military recruitment the U.S. employs, see Sandel (2009).
3. See Aristotle (1925). For an excellent, accessible treatment of Aristotle's conception of civic virtue, see also Sandel (2009).

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