Why We Fought: Holocaust Memory in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*

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□–*Steven Spielberg's film* Saving Private Ryan *has been criticized for its failure to frame narrative action in terms of national, moral purpose. This criticism can be understood in terms of the constraints that the "Vietnam syndrome" places upon contemporary cinematic narratives of war; Vietnam memory subverts earnest declaration of high national principle. This essay examines how* Saving Private Ryan *"reillusions" American national identity in the wake of Vietnam by giving presence to an even more distant past. Supported by close textual analysis of key scenes centering upon the sole Jewish character in the film, this reading argues that the specific moral justification for waging war and accepting its horrors and sacrifices is found in a moral crusade against the Nazi program of Holocaust. By suturing the Holocaust into the film as its moral foundation, the film participates in the "Americanization" of Holocaust memory, circumvents Vietnam as a source of traumatic memory, manufactures a redemptive national identity, and constructs an ethically usable past in the present.*

DESPITE its commercial success and artistic accolades, acclaim for *Saving Private Ryan* has not been universal. Criticisms note flaws of commission and omission. Allegations on one hand claim that *Saving Private Ryan* romanticizes the inhumane conditions of warfare, valorizes each soldier's persistence in the face of uncertain survival, and commemorates the soldier's sacrifice. Others allege that the film suppresses the indispensable element of justification–in other words, "Why we fight." It is my contention that these criticisms can be understood by reading *Saving Private Ryan* as a response to this nation's enduring traumatic memory, frequently characterized by the condensation signifier of "the Vietnam syndrome." *Saving Private Ryan* performs two functions of cultural memory simultaneously. It "reillusions" American national identity even as it pays homage to the war sacrifices and accomplishments of "the Greatest Generation." Precisely because the film participates in shaping collective memory, it is as much about contemporary matters as it is about commemorating an historical past. Consequently, the manner in which the film constructs memory requires our attending to opportunities for, and constraints upon, contemporary narratives that speak to national identity.

As Owen (1999) argues, the Viet-

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nam syndrome has disabled the rhetorical function of jeremiad. To claim that contemporary conditions have arisen as a result of a lapse, a falling away of the individual from the principles of the collective, and to claim that redemption can be achieved through a rededication to those principles, requires a fundamental faith in those principles and in the bonds between individual and community. Here Vietnam's legacy presents a challenge: How can one make such a call when the legitimacy of that bond has been violated? How can one valorize past sacrifices, celebrate the virtues of those sacrifices, and lay the groundwork for future calls for sacrifice, when memory of Vietnam subverts earnest declaration of national purpose and identity with its own cynical voice and ironic inflection? In *Saving Private Ryan*, Owen contends, Spielberg meets this challenge by constructing the justification for the national commitment to wage war through *visual* tropes rather than through the established war film convention of "the speech," a declaration of moral principles explaining why we fight. As the title of this essay suggests, Spielberg constructs the moral justification for waging war and accepting its horrors and sacrifices in a moral crusade against the Nazi program of Holocaust. Despite the fact that this crusade is utterly implausible as an historically valid premise for U. S. involvement in World War II (Novick, 1999), the Holocaust has gained definition in the final third of this century as the premier moral failing of Western (read: Christian) culture, a transcendent benchmark for personal and collective moral judgments and responsibilities and, perhaps, the sole unifying signifier of the American Jewish community. It is well worth noting that the emergence of the Holocaust as a symbolic construction roughly parallels the time frame of the Vietnam syndrome.

What might be the implications, then, as well as the entailments and accomplishments, of re-imagining the war as a national quest against the consuming flames of the Holocaust? To explore these questions, I begin with a closer examination of criticisms leveled at *Saving Private Ryan*. I then turn to the film and discuss how Holocaust memory is woven into the narrative. Next, I examine the "Americanization" of Holocaust memory and finally, I consider how reimagining national purpose through the Holocaust constructs a more ecumenical national identity, one that is more consistent with conditions of post-Vietnam America.

Criticisms, Left and Right

On the political and cultural left, criticisms of Spielberg's film have focused upon the ideological legitimation that inevitably accompanies cinematic tellings of war stories. For example, historian Howard Zinn (1998) writes:

[K]nowing the horrors of war has never been an obstacle to a quick build-up of war spirit by patriotic speeches and an obsequious press. All that bloodshed, all that pain, all those torn limbs and exposed intestines will not deter a brave people from going to war. They just need to believe that the cause is just. . . . Vietnam caused large numbers of Americans to question the enterprise of war itself. Now, *Saving Private Ryan*, aided by superb cinematographic technology, draws on our deep feeling for the GIs in order to rescue not just *Private Ryan* but the good name of war. (p. 39)

Film critic Thomas Doherty (1998) echoes Zinn's concerns about succumbing to the seductions of the film's technol-

ogy: "The guilty secret here is that far from being horrifying and repulsive, the stunning spectacle of sight and sound is a joy to behold and hearken to from a theater seat, pure cinema at its most hypnotic and intense. Godard is right: war on screen is always exhilarating" (p. 69).

Beyond the claims of saving war's good name, Spielberg has also been accused of participating in a cross-generation fawning over "the Greatest Generation," an uncritical and mawkish swansong of adulation by a baby-boomer generation for its elders (Goldstein, 1999). In a world in which moral certainties and principled action have given way to murkiness of national purpose, moral expedience in foreign policy, and personal self-indulgence, *Saving Private Ryan* is both homage to those who sacrificed and an expression of longing for a time when moral distinctions were far less problematic. Of course, the clarities of that former time owe, in part, to distortive systems of privilege and power relations based upon race, gender, ethnicity, and religion.

Conservative voices have been equally harsh towards *Saving Private Ryan* for what it fails to accomplish. Bruce Edwards (1998) writes in *Human Events*, "I cannot remember a WWII movie with so few stirring speeches, nor one so bereft of endearing allusions to one's native soil. Neither have I seen one whose dialogue features so little reference to the propriety of defending freedom against oppression" (p. 22). Rather, "the grand moral landscape" of the war has been reduced to a "defiantly personal, quite private morality" (p. 22). Christopher Caldwell (1998) writes in *Commentary* that the narrative "undercuts any potentially patriotic message." In a film "rich in

examples of cowardice and criminality," Caldwell is astonished by Spielberg's admission of identification with Corporal Upham, an "unctuous figure" (p. 49) and the most glaring example of what Caldwell reads as cowardice. Moreover, he, too, notes with disappointment the lack of nationalistic discourse:

> In any war there are two narratives: the narrative of civilization . . . and the on-the-ground narrative. . . . There can be overlap . . . [although] frequently the two narratives exist in hermetic isolation from each other. . . . What is new about [*Saving Private Ryan*] is that, as a battle film, it is purged of the context of civilization. (p. 50)

Caldwell argues that audiences can contend with vivid depictions of the chaos, violence, and sheer terror of warfare precisely because the narrative of civilization creates an interpretive context for these depictions. *Saving Private Ryan* "hardly so much as acknowledges the existence of this realm of public values." This is not to say that Spielberg's soldiers operate in a realm devoid of human values; rather, their experiences are "exiled from the values that put them there in the first place." Thus, "the film fatally 'privatizes patriotism' by divorcing it from its *proper, political context*" (p. 50, emphasis added).

Both strands of criticism are understandable in terms of this nation's traumatizing Vietnam experience. Traumatic memory reaches beyond the lives of those who have lived trauma *into* the lives of those for whom it becomes inheritance. It imbues the past with an enduring emotional salience (Schudson, 1995). Because the rhetorical structuring of the past is infused with traumatic memory of Vietnam, the resonances of that traumatic memory militate against an integrative national community bound by common inter-

ests, agendas, commitments, and obligations.

This is the specter of "the Vietnam syndrome." It motivated Richard Nixon's Vietnam policies to stave off national decline into a "pitiful giant" but to no avail. That image was made vivid by photographs of helicopter wreckage in the Iranian desert, evidence of the botched rescue mission of American hostages in Teheran. It loomed large in Ronald Reagan's campaign of national "reillusionment" (Wallace, 1995), in his celebration of the warrior on his trip to the cemeteries at Normandy and at Bitburg, and in his characterization of Vietnam as simply one battle in the ultimately successful war against the Soviets' "evil empire." George Bush's inaugural address named the need to "get Vietnam behind us," and America's Vietnam failure was context for his address to the nation on the eve of the Persian Gulf War; this time, our military would not be fighting with "one hand tied behind their backs." Vietnam's presence was palpable in the crossfire of acrimonious debates about guilt and responsibility precipitated by Robert McNamara's 1995 *mea culpa, In Retrospect*. Vietnam persists in contemporary pursuits of multi-lateral military ventures, in public relations campaigns to craft public support for military action (and in parodic commentaries such as the film *Wag the Dog*), in the reliance upon strategies of techno-war, and in the control of news media by military spokespersons (Haines, 1995).

In the wake of "the Vietnam syndrome," reconstituting an integrative past—imag(in)ing a national community unified by shared moral principles in pursuit of transcendent promise—poses significant challenges. Spielberg (1998) acknowledges, "After Vietnam,

[realism] was all that mattered" in war films (p. 66). The patriotic fervor, simple moral clarities, and broad cultural stereotypes that defined the cinematic tropes of war films of decades ago are no longer viable, having been reduced to ironic caricatures. The diminished capacity of the American national community to suspend disbelief and to engage discourses of national celebration owes to the disillusioning experiences of the final third of the twentieth century.[1]

It is understandable, then, that Spielberg's homage to those who fought in the greatest of wars offers, quite literally, a pedestrian view of that war. "The speech" is absent, no longer a viable narrative device, and its absence creates the appearance of deficiency, what Caldwell bemoans as the absent "narrative of civilization." All we encounter is men contending with material conditions—terrifying, horrific, exhausting, chaotic, life threatening. Moral purpose is reduced to Capt. John Miller's actuarial rationalizations—sacrifice some to save untold others—yet even that moral tenet is overturned as many must be sacrificed to save one.

But embedded within the film's narrative structure, scenic composition and character development we find the Holocaust. We may be directed toward the "quite private morality" of the film's characters, but the Holocaust is the "grand moral landscape," the ground upon which these characters search for Private Ryan. In the film, characters' understanding of this great, *American* moral enterprise is so profound and foundational that it emerges only in the knowing glance of an eye on Omaha Beach. Its lesson is at the center of the film's dramatic tension, where it is tested and found true. Spielberg's earlier critical triumph, *Schindler's List*,

proclaims a secularized aphorism from the *Mishnah*, "Whoever saves one life saves the entire world." The quest to save Private Ryan instantiates this moral tenet.

Holocaust Memory as Visual Trope

Central to Holocaust memory is the character development of Private Mellish and the narrative functions that this character serves. As the unit's Jewish member, Mellish is the vehicle through which viewers can engage the Holocaust and participate in construction of its memory as an *American* phenomenon. Readings of Mellish rest, in part, upon that character's relationship to others. Key in this regard is the character of Corporal Upham. Upham is a multi-lingual interpreter, fluent in French and German; he is young, well educated, infused through his literary experiences with romantic ideals of warfare and the bonds of brotherhood, and thoroughly naïve about war's brute realities. Upham's surname suggests English origins; he is positioned as the sheltered, idealistic, and privileged WASP.

Mellish serves three distinct functions. First, he is the basis for inserting into the film an acknowledgment of the nation's moral conscience and commitment—the reason that the nation is waging war. Second, Mellish embodies a secularized Judaism and is constructed as a thoroughly assimilated and recognizable American character. Third, in Mellish's demise, we encounter one of the key dynamics that motivate contemporary Holocaust memory: the mortally endangered Jew, resisting; an American Christian incapable of acting despite hearing the cries of the Jew; and the unmitigated horror of Nazi predation and extermination because no one was there to prevent it (Cole,

1999; Cornwell, 1999; Linenthal, 1995; Novick, 1999). A close reading of key scenes, including description of their technical composition, reveals how the semiotic structure of these scenes supports these contentions.

The Unspoken Moral Covenant

Following an opening that frames *Saving Private Ryan* as a memory project located in the present moment, the film flashes back to 1944 with a 24 minute reenactment of the landing on Omaha Beach. This scene is the basis of much of the film's critical acclaim, moving Paul Fussell (1989) to suggest that it be used as a documentary entitled, "Omaha Beach: Aren't You Glad You Weren't There?" (Cohen, 1998/99). The landing scene carries the viewer along at such a frenetic pace that any query into the reasons for this massive and horrific enterprise is likely to be deferred. The first moment of relative *stasis* is reached after the beach has been secured and the German emplacements destroyed.

The moment is defined by a long shot with continuous fluid action. It begins with a 3/4 shot of two American soldiers squatting in a German trench rifling the remains of a dead German. One of the soldiers stands up and calls out to Mellish, "Hey, Fish. Look at this. A Hitler Youth knife." He hands the knife up to Mellish, who is foregrounded in the shot. Mellish flips the knife and replies in a mocking tone, "And now it's a *shabbat* challah cutter, right?" In this off-handed reply is the recognition of something more ominous, and the camera tracks Mellish in a continuous close-up shot as he collapses to the ground and begins to sob. The camera cuts back to the soldiers in the trench. They grimace, lower their eyes, and shake their heads. The cam-

era returns to Mellish in a low angle, extreme close-up shot, signifying the centrality of his trauma to this scene. At this point, the camera begins another long fluid shot. It cuts to Sgt. Horvath, who we see filling a small tin with sand. The camera pans in close to enable us to see that the tin is labeled "France." Horvath places it in his rucksack along with two other tins labeled "North Africa" and "Italy." The camera pans up to a sustained low angle close-up shot of Horvath's face as he sighs inaudibly and looks away. Horvath's demeanor suggests an inadvertent intruder. The camera cross-cuts among Horvath, Mellish, and unnamed others. In these cross-cuts, we see eyes averting and looking away all the while that Mellish sobs.

Here is the implied covenant: No matter how far they must travel, no matter where they must fight, even to the ends of the earth they will persevere in order to end this unspeakable, and unspoken, horror. The ritual of *shabbat*, conducted in synagogues and in Jewish homes around the globe, signifies and celebrates the covenant of a people with their God. In this souvenir knife lies the profanity that would annihilate the sacred. Mellish is at the center of this horror.

Americanizing the Judaic Ethos

A covenant may be sacred, an ideology profane, but the ability to identify with the potential victims is crucial for others to act on their behalf and for audiences to care about the character's fate. In Mellish we find the thoroughly assimilated American Jew. There is nothing alien about him; there is no vestige of the signifiers that differentiated European Jewry from the Christian societies in which they lived and from the national identities that they

were denied. In fact, Mellish embodies the ideals of American masculinity. He is physically fit, self-assured, knowledgeable about the ways of war, quick-witted, adept at verbal sparring and heterosexual banter, and entirely comfortable in the company of men.

As an assimilated American Jew, Mellish does not wear his faith openly, but he flaunts his identity as a Jew to those who would destroy him. In a scene in which the patrol is under fire, he taunts the unseen German shooter, "Your father was circumcised by my rabbi, you prick!" In another, he encounters a column of German POWs, marching under guard with their hands clasped behind their heads. He approaches the column and thrusts his dog tags, entangled with a Star of David, towards the passing prisoners, mocking them with "Juden ... Ja, Juden, Juden!!" Mellish has moxie.

Abandonment and Extermination

This scene is set in a second floor room and occurs during the final battle segment of the film. It is comprised of 39 shots, and lasts a total of 4 minutes. Action is continuous and frantic, offering viewers little respite. In the narrative flow, Corporal Upham is charged with bringing belts of ammunition to Mellish and another soldier who have taken up position in a second story room. Beset by fear and surrounded by the frantic movement of experienced soldiers in battle, Upham becomes overwhelmed and freezes. German soldiers move towards the building. Upham hides behind a pillar at the corner of the building as the Germans pass by him and ascend the stairway to the second floor. In the next shot, we are positioned in the upstairs room, with the camera situated behind the two Americans, looking towards the door-

way. We hear footsteps on the stairs. There is a momentary silence. Mellish calls out, "Upham?" Silence. The Americans spray their last rounds of ammunition in a burst of machine gun fire at the wall by the doorway. We hear the sound of a body collapsing, and blood begins to pool in the doorway. All is silent. Suddenly, there is a burst of fire from the doorway, and the unnamed American soldier writhes on the floor, shot through the throat. Mellish shoots the first German to enter the room. Another German soldier enters the room. With Mellish's ammunition now exhausted, hand-to-hand fighting ensues. It is at this point in the scene that Holocaust memory becomes vividly inscribed.

Cinematically, Mellish's struggle with the German is disorienting and claustrophobic. The camera dollies in for extreme close-ups and pulls back repeatedly—creating the sensation for viewers of ducking and dodging the lunging action. A rocking motion is added to this visual frenzy.[2] The camera then parallel-cuts to the battle raging in the ruins of the village and to Upham on the stairs cowering, unable to fix his foot on a step. The following shots demonstrate how viscerally the audience is sutured into the action. From Upham on the stairs, the camera parallel-cuts back to Mellish and the German. We begin with a low angle medium close-up of the German, entirely obscuring Mellish. The camera pulls back to include Mellish, and then it cants, signifying the intensity and urgency of the chaos. The camera dollies in again, cutting Mellish from the scene and focusing again on the German. Mellish and the German roll over the mortally wounded American, as their proximity to the camera's lens underpins the suffocating terror of the

moment. The entire shot transpires in seconds. A parallel-cut takes us back to Upham, with a high angle long shot, followed by another that returns us to a long shot of the struggle. Mixed in with the ambient sounds of grunts is the distinctive sound of metal as Mellish pulls his bayonet from its sheath. An extreme close-up follows. Mellish is on top; as the two roll over each other, screaming, the German wrests control of the bayonet. Another parallel cut returns us to Upham, in an extreme low angle shot, focusing upon his gaiters and boots, and the steps that he cannot master; the screams from the room further debilitate Upham, as a medium close up of his face pans down to fingers fumbling the rifle's safety release, and then pans back to the terror in Upham's face. Another parallel cut returns us to the room with a low angle, extreme close-up of Mellish's face. The blade is pointed at his chest. The camera pans up to the German, with the blade prominent in the center of the image. Mellish screams as he musters the strength to push the knife away. A high angle, extreme close-up follows; the German is on top and in control of the bayonet. He begins to speak (in German), "Let's put an end to this." Then a close-up follows of Mellish and the German in which Mellish entreats in rapid fire, "Stop, stop, stop!" Drenched with sweat and panting, the German slowly begins to penetrate Mellish's chest with the bayonet; the sounds of its entry are unmistakable. In a low angle, extreme close-up of the German's hand on the bayonet's handle, we see the blade penetrating further into Mellish's chest. Mellish's struggling gives way to sounds of gurgling and breaking bone. The German speaks softly (again, in German), "This will be easier for you. Much easier. It

will soon be over."[3] In a close-up of Mellish, mouth agape, the German's face enters the frame, dripping sweat, their lips nearly close enough to kiss. The German soothes Mellish, softly uttering "Shhh ... shhhhh. ..." The camera pulls back. The German is lying on Mellish, one hand on the bayonet handle, the other restraining the now limp body. He pushes the blade all the way in. The only sound is of the German's heavy breathing.

Meanwhile, a parallel cut takes us to the exterior action of the battle raging in the streets, and another parallel cut, using a high angle shot looking down the stairs, returns us to Upham, collapsed and in tears. The leg of the German enters the frame. From the unseen room, there is only silence. Upham tries to make a gesture of conciliation. An extreme low angle shot looks up over Upham's body toward the head of the stairs where the German is bathed in light. He begins to descend. A reverse shot follows, from the top of the stairs, and as the German continues downward, he steps around the cowering Upham, a potential foe of no consequence. We, too, are positioned to look down upon the sobbing Upham. In the next shot, a close-up, the German emerges into the exterior light. He looks to his left, his right, behind, and then exits. In this brief shot, we can glimpse in passing the military designation on his collar; Mellish's slayer is a member of the SS, the *Schutzstaffel*, the elite corps of the Nazi party that ran the extermination camps and coordinated the Final Solution. In the last shot of this four minute scene, the camera pans back up the stairs. It dollies in on Upham, who sinks behind the bars of the staircase railing, curls up into a fetal position and heaves with sobs.

The intimacy of Mellish's rape-like struggle and his blood sacrifice are hor-

rific. Their impact is intensified by Upham's inability to act. Theater audiences groan audibly as the camera parallel-cuts again and again between the life-and-death struggle in the upstairs room, and Upham on the stairway. We see Upham in anguish, incapacitated by fear, unable to command his body to act as he knows he should. He—and we—hear Mellish's screams and cries as he struggles for his life and ultimately succumbs. Woven into the fabric of this scene, viewers encounter one of the most compelling reasons for the Americanization of Holocaust memory—guilt for not having acted, for not having acted sooner, for not having done enough. Caldwell and Edwards long for a speech that celebrates a nation's commitment to oppose tyranny and oppression as foundational to its moral identity, an identity that has fused the Christian principles of colonial America with the secular nationalism of the modern nation-state (Bercovitch, 1978). This scene instantiates the failure of America—as a predominantly Christian nation[4]—to act upon that commitment, to oppose actively and vigorously Nazi persecution, and to help save European Jewry.

Americanizing Holocaust Memory

The cultural genealogy by which Holocaust memory grew into a distinctly American phenomenon reveals the entanglements of popular and political culture (Sturken, 1997), and of vernacular and official discourses (Bodnar, 1992). To begin, the Holocaust did not emerge from the ashes of the extermination camps as a coherent symbolic construction. For a decade and a half following the end of World War II, the program of genocide that consumed European Jewry was cast within the

larger horrors of the war in Europe (Cole, 1999). The traumas borne by survivors of the camps who emigrated to start new lives were generally borne in silence. Starting anew after trauma requires looking forward.[5]

Not until 1959 was the word "holocaust" used in the *New York Times* (Cole, 1999, p. 7). Not until the 1960s did "the Holocaust" begin to crystallize in popular imagination as specifically signifying the systematic and bureaucratically organized program of Nazi mass extermination of European Jewry. The 1960 capture of Adolph Eichmann and his 1961 trial in Israel was the first showcase for international attention on the annihilation of six million Jews.[6] As a result of Jewish survivors testifying at the trial, "the Holocaust" began to take shape as a distinctly Jewish nightmare. At this juncture "the 'Holocaust' became an 'archetype', 'an independent icon', 'a figure for subsequent pain, suffering, and destruction' and 'began to inform all writers' literary imagination as a prospective trope," (Young, cited in Cole, 1999, p. 8).

Most scholars are in agreement that the 1967 Arab-Israeli War is the central moment in the construction of Holocaust memory. It held the same foreboding as did the destruction of European Jewry, but this time, it was motivated by annihilation of the state of Israel, and this time, at the hands of a unified Arab world. Six days after the first attacks, Israeli forces stood on the Jordan River, on the banks of the Nile, and at the gates of Damascus. Jerusalem was retaken, and Israelis—*Jews*—stood again at the sacred wall of the Second Temple. This was a defining moment for the American Jewish community, as well as for the state of Israel.

Judaic Studies scholar Jacob Neusner (1992) points to three inter-related phenomena that underlie the Americanization of Holocaust memory: First is the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Second is the emergence in the mid- to late 1960s of multiple discourses within the American community asserting ethnic minority identity and victimization. One manifestation of this trend was the establishment of various ethnic studies programs and departments in colleges and universities throughout the nation. It was in this institutional context that courses on the Holocaust began to be offered, and these courses drew—and continue to draw—a broad population of students, including the predominantly Christian population. Holocaust memory is also the beneficiary of an unfortunate consequence of the rising recognition of minority histories. Edward Linenthal (1995), chronicler of U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, writes that these discourses of identity have degenerated into "a grotesque competition for status as 'first and worst' victims among American ethnic groups, vying for the 'fruits' of officially recognized suffering" (p. 14). In this contest, the Holocaust is unassailable; no claims of oppression can compete with its enormity, its sweep, its utter brutality, and its vast bureaucratic engineering.

The third factor contributing to the potency of American Holocaust memory is the mythic transformation "from the mundane murder of millions into a tale about cosmic evil, unique and beyond all comparing" (p. 269). In the Holocaust we encounter the archetypal myth of salvation, the "myth of the darkness followed by the light; of passage through the netherworld and past the gates of hell; then, purified by suffering and by blood, into the new age" (p. 268). Following the the Six-Day War, the American Jewish

community began to think of itself in terms of sacrifice and redemption. European Jewry was the offering of holocaust, literally a sacrifice consumed by fire. Israel and America were the sites and sources of a people's redemption. A story of evil's banality (Arendt, 1964)—the bureaucratic administration of a state policy of extermination—became transformed into the central cultural narrative of survival and renewal beyond consumption and incineration. Moreover, the allure and accessibility of Holocaust memory to Christian America is due at least in part to its mythic construction through concepts central to Christian theology—innocence sacrificed, renewal, and redemption.

The exhilaration of Israel's 1967 victory and this "new age" was soon crushed by the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Israel was imperiled. Victory did come but only after dire setbacks at considerable human cost and after the direct intervention of the U. S. by airlifting supplies in the midst of the war. This role was a key factor for both Israeli and American Holocaust memory. Michael Berenbaum (1986) writes, "the fate of [Israel] was dependent upon gentile rulers . . . [Israel] was humbled to discover itself dependent on the good will of others in order to survive" (p. 450) *once again,* an ironic counterpart to Yad Vashem's Holocaust lesson, "Never again."

In 1976 an Air France flight originating in Tel Aviv was hijacked by Palestinian terrorists and flown to Entebbe airport in Uganda. Seventy Israeli passengers were identified and marked as hostages to be murdered; a dramatic Israeli commando raid foiled the hijackers and rescued the passengers. This event was covered widely by the U. S. news media and was quickly made into

a television movie in 1977. Also in 1977 Israelis endorsed the nationalistic Likud Party and chose Menachem Begin as their prime minister. Begin articulated an uncompromising Jewish national identity built upon strength, resistance, and self-interest. In a world where the place of Jews is never fully accepted, often debated, and repeatedly the object of genocidal hatred, militancy is survival, compromise, death. In the United States, the growing identification of the American Jewish community with Israel was central to the myth of "Holocaust and Redemption." It meant that the survival of Israel—the redemptive site of the extermination of six million—became a sacred obligation. Holocaust memory became the basis of the covenant binding the American Jewish community and the state of Israel.

Threatening this covenant was President Jimmy Carter. An evangelical Christian, Carter expressed support for a Palestinian homeland. He endorsed the Palestinian Liberation Organization as a party to the Geneva peace talks on the Middle East. In the autumn of 1977, he proposed linking the sale of F-15 military aircraft to Israel with sales to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, nations that four years earlier had sought the annihilation of Israel. The debate on that proposal continued well into 1978.

Holocaust memory was not only being shaped in the official discourses of the government. In March 1978, American Nazis applied for a parade permit in Skokie, Illinois, home to 30,000 Jews, among whom were numerous Holocaust survivors. Like the raid on Entebbe, this event, too, was transformed into a critically acclaimed television docudrama (O'Connor, 1981). As columnist William Safire

noted at the time, "America has no vivid reminder of the Final Solution, but we have a reminder than not even Israelis can boast: our own home-grown handful of Nazis" (Safire, quoted in Linenthal, 1995, p. 18).

Through the genre of docudrama, television has played a crucial role in shaping American Holocaust memory and in widening its identification beyond the Jewish community. No television event had greater impact than did the nine and a half hour television miniseries *Holocaust.* Beginning on Sunday, April 16, 1978, and running for four consecutive nights, *Holocaust* introduced American viewers to the Weiss family, a family of thoroughly assimilated German Jews. Through them, American viewers could experience the consuming encroachment of the Final Solution. The series was viewed by as many as 120 million Americans. Through the cooperation and lobbying of various interests, the series saturated public consciousness. Newspapers carried special inserts. Study guides were prepared for viewers and school children. Religious leaders had advance viewings, so from pulpits across the nation, the Sunday sermons of priests, ministers, and preachers would reinforce the designation of the series premiere as "Holocaust Sunday." Yellow Stars of David distributed by the National Conference of Christians and Jews were to be worn proudly on that day (Novick, 1999).[7]

The national impact of this television event was substantial and drew further attention to the need for the Carter administration to repair its breech with the American Jewish community. On May 1, 1978, less than two weeks following the conclusion of the mini-series, President Carter announced his executive order forming the President's Commission on the Holocaust. The announcement was made in a Rose Garden ceremony celebrating the 30th anniversary of the state of Israel. Prime Minister Begin was in attendance, as were 1000 rabbis (Linenthal, 1995). The political expedience and transparency of Carter's announcement notwithstanding, this act ultimately institutionalized the central place of American Holocaust memory in American national identity; it resulted in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, situated on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

The appropriation of Holocaust memory and its symbolic construction as a distinctly American phenomenon has resulted from the interplay of official public culture, the trends and discourses that pervade the society, and the mass mediated texts of American popular culture. In fact, the significance of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, dedicated in April 1993, cannot be evaluated apart from the impact of *Schindler's List,* released in December of the same year. President Clinton and Oprah, alike, urged Americans to view the film as a moral obligation of citizenship (Cole, 1999). With endorsements such as these, we can appreciate the import of the following commemorative sentiments: "[D]edicated to the memory of the six million Jews and millions of other non-Jews who were murdered by the Nazis and their numerous helpers ... [Its] main task ... is to present the facts of the Holocaust, to tell the American public as clearly and comprehensively as possible what happened in that darkest chapter...." Its most relevant moral lesson is understanding "the *passive bystander's inadvertent guilt* ...." (Weinberg, cited in Berenbaum, 1993, pp. xiv–xv; emphasis added). These words,

written about the Museum by its director, might equally have been written of the film.

Holocaust Memory, *Saving Private Ryan,* and National Reillusionment

I conclude as I began, by noting Owen's (1999) argument about the disabling impact of America's Vietnam experience upon the secular jeremiad, a call to a people to redeem themselves through a rededication to the principles that define them as "a people." Historian Sacvan Bercovitch (1978) writes, "Only in the United States has nationalism carried with it the Christian meaning of the sacred ... only *America* has united nationality and universality, civic and spiritual selfhood, secular and redemptive history, the country's past and paradise to be, in a single synthetic ideal" (p. 176). Holocaust memory has a crucial role in American national identity that extends beyond the American Jewish community to the larger, predominantly Christian population. Christian theology, secularized through the centuries since colonial times, has produced a national story and a national identity that is grounded in principles of innocence, guilt, sacrifice, suffering, and transcendent redemption (Engelhardt, 1995; Steele, 1995). These are the principles through which the individual tales of settlement, expansion, travail, and triumph have been integrated into the American mythology of ever expanding promise and inclusiveness, of movement towards a transcendent state of political grace. This is the secular covenant that is the source of national unification and common commitment as a people.

In *Saving Private Ryan* we need no explanation to understand why Omaha Beach is being stormed; it is in affirmation of this covenant. Cast against the backdrop of the inferno that Elie Wiesel calls the "Kingdom of Night," we begin to understand the importance of eight men searching for Private Ryan. In the context of Holocaust, no action is more powerful than affirming the value of a single human life. Here we encounter the voice of Judaic law, Judaic principle, the Judaic meaning of the sacred.

Still, for a contemporary film set in events more than a half-century ago, the subtle yet central role of Holocaust memory requires explanation. I propose three related answers: the continuing resonances of America's Vietnam syndrome and the need to acknowledge its presence; the problematic of Christian foundations in the mythic story of America; and the perpetual need to construct an ethically usable past.

Moral righteousness may have led many Americans—policy makers and ordinary citizens, alike—to view waging war in Vietnam as another chapter in a national story of mythic proportions. Vietnam may have begun for many as a story of righteousness opposing tyranny, a quest against evil, but in that quest that righteousness was revealed as distorted and bankrupt. Public accusations leveled against the national government and those who enacted its policies invoked Holocaust memory directly. This time, America was accused of conducting a campaign of genocide against a "lesser" people, a characterization supported by an unfortunate number of military and political figures, alike. Moreover, these accusations of "holocaust perpetrator" occurred during a period of rising Holocaust awareness in the American community. As early as 1963, Bertrand Russell wrote in the *New York Times*

that the United States was conducting a *war of annihilation* in Vietnam, with the goal of *exterminating* those who opposed its political aims, and engaging in *atrocities* against innocent people through chemical spraying and napalm (Russell, 1967). By 1971, philosopher Paul Menzel posed the question in *Moral Argument and the Vietnam War* whether the term "genocide" should be used to characterize U. S. policy in Vietnam, noting its potent use by that time (Menzel, 1971). It is no surprise, then, that the impact of Holocaust imagery contributed to the symbolic devastation of national self-image. As a consequence, the lingering hold of Vietnam upon American memory has made the earnest declaration of national purpose and identity fundamentally problematic.

How then, as Owen (1999) asks, can one tell an American war story that is in any way commemorative and celebratory, especially when cinematic realism must acknowledge Vietnam? After all, in *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg acknowledges Vietnam's influence by showing Americans committing atrocities. One solution is to leapfrog over the source of traumatic memory (Vietnam) and manufacture redemption by giving presence to an even more distant past (World War II). The use of Holocaust memory in *Saving Private Ryan* re-enobles American national identity. On first glance, American moral righteousness in this narrative is placed securely beyond reproach, and an Americanized Holocaust memory is situated in the mainstream of national identity. No matter what else one might say of this nation's shortcomings, one can say that it embraced the struggle against the "Kingdom of Night." It recognized how dire and urgent the moment. It acted. From the

Hitler Youth knife to the *shabbat* challah cutter, from the knowing glances to the labeled tins of sand in Sgt. Horvath's rucksack, this greatest of moral covenants was fulfilled.

However, a closer examination reveals the paradoxical voice of a now secularized Christianity as the source of the nation's moral imagination. This paradox is instantiated in Corporal Upham's crisis, and this crisis echoes in the theological challenge of the Holocaust for contemporary Christian theology. In the film's narrative, Upham articulates a view of war that is romantic and Emersonian. War is the testing ground of righteousness, revealing the true moral order of the world; it is the context in which men bond and can express their essential masculinity. But the crisis emerges when Upham discovers his betrayal; war is moral chaos. Incapacitated on the stairs as he hears Mellish's screams, he knows he has failed, as the romantic myth of war has failed him. Earlier in the narrative, his commitment to rules of fair play induced Tom Hanks' Captain Miller to release a captured German. Following Upham's failure to come to Mellish's aid, he hides in a bomb crater, where he sees that same German shoot and mortally wound Miller. He is aggrieved, responsible for two deaths. Now abandoning the moral imagination that has failed him, Upham captures the German at the battle's end. The German attempts, once again, to appeal to Upham's sense of fair play; Upham fires his rifle, murdering the German soldier. In this act is Upham's final recognition of the paradox in the moral foundations of American national identity. In this act is the warning of Begin and the Israel of Holocaust and Redemption: Fair play by the rules of liberal pluralism can mean

death in a world in which claims of moral righteousness obscure the hatreds upon which those claims prosper. In this dialectical tension Upham must now live, seeking to reconcile his need for a moral code with his memories and his culpability.

Similarly, Christianity grapples with its internal contradictions brought to light vividly by the Holocaust. Christianity's claims of universal brotherhood and charity exist in tension with its exclusionary claims of the true path to salvation. In this regard, theologian Rosemary Reuther (1982) writes:

The anti-Semitic heritage of Christian civilization is neither an accidental nor a peripheral element. . . . Anti-Semitism in Western civilization springs, at its root, from Christian theological anti-Judaism. It was Christian theology that developed the thesis of the reprobate status of the Jew in history and laid the foundations for the demonic view of the Jew that fanned the flames of popular hatred. . . . Anti-Judaism was the negative side of the Christian affirmation that Jesus was the Christ. (p. 25)

Echoing a widely stated position, Reuther argues further that Christian antipathy towards the Jews resulted in far less opposition to the Nazi program of Holocaust, and far less intervention on their behalf, than might otherwise have happened. Christians "must take responsibility for the perpetuation of the demonic myth of the Jew that allowed the Nazis to make them the scapegoat of their project of racial purity" (p. 27).

Moreover, and regardless of complicity, indifference, or resistance, the mythic construction of the Holocaust is compelling to Christians *as* Christians (Dietrich, 1995; Gushee, 1994). "Christianity's optimistic, transcendent claims" demand "a 'meaning' for suffering and death," and declare "a redemptive sacrifice having already

taken place" (Steele, 1995, p. 13). In this "triumphant . . . message of transcendence and consolation . . . [a]ll will be made clear in due course, including, presumably, why the six million died as they did" (p. 13). Here, in part, is the allure of Holocaust memory for the American Christian community.

Finally, by suturing Holocaust memory into *Saving Private Ryan*, the past becomes a source of moral guidance for the future. Literary critic Tim Wood (1998) writes that "there is a function for [narrative] in the construction of an ethically usable past" (p. 339). By constructing history through the narrative form, he argues, we confront the "uncontrollable 'other' " in a therapeutic practice of collective memory. *Saving Private Ryan* is such a narrative. The other that we confront is certainly the nightmare of the Nazi inferno, but we also confront the "uncontrollable otherness" of our own historical past. These are the disjunctures between the moral foundations of an uplifting and unifying national identity, and the indisputable recognition that those very foundations were found wanting, and more distressingly, were part of the "landscape of memory" upon which the Holocaust was carried out.

By suturing Holocaust memory into *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg bestows equal stature upon the vast historical sweep of the D-Day invasion *and* the earthbound and pedestrian search for Private Ryan. In so doing, he reimagines and reillusions a secular American national identity. This newly constructed identity overcomes the defects of that which dominated during the years of Nazi fascism and which found its ruin in Southeast Asia. Spielberg's newly constructed national identity is ecumenical, fusing Christian and Judaic principle. As I have noted, *Schin-*

dler's List begins with a secularized aphorism from the *Mishnah*: "Whosoever saves a single life saves the entire world." Its unabridged translation proclaims: "Whosoever saves a single life *of Israel* saves the entire world." In this newly constructed national identity, grounded in American Holocaust memory and the commitments to which it calls us, the distinction between these two versions disappear. The two become one.[8]

Peter Novick writes in his provocative book, *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999), "In recent years 'Holocaust survivor' has become an honorific term, evoking not just sympathy but admiration, and even awe. Survivors are thought of and customarily described as exemplars of courage, fortitude, and wisdom derived from their suffering" (p. 68). Insofar as Spielberg appropriates the Holocaust and weaves it into American cultural memory, we are enabled to bestow the same honorifics upon those who sacrificed in order to end its horror. Here we see the consequences of leapfrogging back over Vietnam to the Second World War. Our inheritance in the present becomes a reconstituted national identity grounded in uncontested and incontestable moral clarity and commitment, an identity whose stature is measured by the enormity of the horror it sought to end. We can only wonder whether a reinvigorated national identity such as this carries with it the germ of another Vietnam.

Notes

[1]Not coincidentally, the last cinematic appearance of a speech declaring national purpose in a film narrative situated in a U. S. war was in John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968). The speech of national moral principle is still a widely used narrative device in fantasy-based films. Its use is both earnest (e.g., *Independence Day*) and ironic (e.g., *Starship Troopers*).

[2]Visual representation offers the viewing audience the opportunity to be positioned as Holocaust "witness." But viewing can also be engaged in voyeuristically, in which one consumes the spectacle of Melliah's consumption. Unlike the fixed photographic image, however, the construction of this scene is designed to bring the viewer into the action, rather than distance the viewer from the images that the camera records. See Zelizer (1998) for a superb treatment of the appropriation of static visual images of the extermination camps.

[3]The grammatical form of "you" used by the German suggests intimacy and familiarity. It is not the form that would ordinarily be employed between strangers.

[4]Bercovitch (1978) provides a detailed treatment of the Christian theocratic foundations of the moral principles for the national, secular credo. The Christian worldview that underlies national identity is crucial to an appreciation of the allure that Holocaust memory holds for the national community.

[5]Historians continue to grapple with questions about the past: What did the Allies know? When did they know it? What could they have done about it? Historian Raul Hilberg (1994) asserts that the U.S. and Great Britain knew of the impending eradication of European Jews as early as the summer of 1942, and the catastrophe began to get press attention in the end of that year. Stories of genocide found their way to the West, but in an environment rich with strategic disinformation, and with limitations upon corroboration, how could one reconcile the uncertainties attributed to these reports with the suspicions that they raised? Moreover, as historian Peter Novick suggests in his provocative book, *The Holocaust in American Life*, in 1942–1943 U.S. attentions were focused primarily upon the war in the Pacific. In the slogan "Remember Pearl Harbor!" we see the national motive of revenge. There is no comparable slogan, or motive, to energize public imagination and outrage towards the mass dislocation, internment, and execution of civilian populations of Europe, generally, or the plight of European Jewry, specifically. True, press coverage of the war *did* include

stories of atrocities, but these were reports of atrocities committed by the Germans *and* the Japanese against national, ethnic, racial, *and* religious groups. However, even this coverage was comparatively minor to that of battles and the military progress of the war effort.

What could have been done remains a topic of heated dispute. Some claim a failure of will and commitment, even among the American Jewish community (Medoff, 1987). The refusal to permit legal entry to the liner, St. Louis (the "Ship of Fools"), with its Jewish refugees, is prominent among the noted failures. So, too, is the failure to target Auschwitz and the railroad lines leading to it. Others claim that these accusations are naïve, ignoring the complex web of political alliances, opportunities, constraints, resources, and capabilities. Discussions in and around the U.S. government specifically addressed the inadvisability of focusing upon the annihilation of European Jewry. Roosevelt was constrained, already accused of being too much in the debt of Jewish interests. The degree of anti-Semitism in the American community suggested the folly of framing the war in Europe as a crusade to save the Jews. Bombing only incapacitated railroad lines for a matter of days, and precision bombing was, and remains, a myth (See Novick, 1999).

[6]As Cole (1999, p. 7) notes, a primary audience for the Eichmann trial was the population of Israelis born subsequent to the war. The post-war Nuremburg trials were expressly concerned with the more encompassing issue of "crimes against humanity," and not what we now signify as "the Holocaust."

[7]This mini-series follows the success of *Roots*, broadcast in 1977. *Holocaust* has been called "the Jewish *Roots*," evidence, perhaps, of Neusner's (1992) contention regarding the fragmentation of American national identity in favor of ethnic identities and claims of victimage as signifiers of status (See Novick, 1999, on this point). The sensitizing power of *Holocaust* for the broader American (i.e., non-Jewish) community was considerable. It enabled the success of the 1981 television movie, *Skokie*, a dramatization of the threatened march by American Nazis in the Chicago suburb with a large Jewish population, many of whom were Holocaust survivors. Coincidentally, the court battle over the Nazis' right to march was contemporaneous with the airing of *Holocaust*. The cultural impact and economic success of the mini-series led to numerous other portrayals of the Holocaust, although none achieved the audience or impact of the original.

[8]The key challenge, of course, is found in the tensions between recognizing the policy entailments of a national identity reconstituted through Americanized Holocaust memory and acting on those entailments as a matter of national moral commitment. For example, at the dedication ceremony for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in April 1993, President Bill Clinton spoke of the fragility of "the safeguards of civilization." Citing the "evil represented here in this museum," Clinton asserted that "as we are its witness, so must we remain its adversary. . . ." Others, including Elie Wiesel, pointedly observed the lack of U. S. resolve in Bosnia against Serbian "ethnic cleansing" (McDonald, 1993, p. A1).

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