SPINS, SENTIMENT, AND SENSATIONALISM: THE JESSICA LYNCH STORY

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Her face was plastered on every magazine in the country, the camouflage of her jacket bringing out the brown of her eyes. As bombs fell on Iraq, killing thousands of civilians, the survival of one woman rose above all death counts to symbolize glory, hope, and freedom. People across America held their breaths during her captivity and rejoiced when she came home. Our reaction to Private Jessica Lynch's story speaks volumes about our voracious appetite for sentimentality, as well as the ubiquitous influences of the media and war propaganda. The treatment of this case reflects the tendencies towards sentimentality and symbolization described by Joan Didion in her essay "Sentimental Journeys"; it also exemplifies ideas about war propaganda voiced by H. Bruce Franklin in his piece "From Realism to Virtual Reality: Images of America's Wars." Didion and Franklin both discuss the way in which reality can be spun, or downright ignored, to mislead the public. The two authors criticize the extreme power of the media and other institutions to shape our perceptions, both through altering truths and g outright lies.

In April 2003, the Pentagon stated that Jessica Lynch had been rescued from an Iraqi hospital in a daring display of American military valor. The media then ran with that heroic story to turn Lynch's tale into one of the most sentimental episodes of the war. An article in the *New York Post*, for example, was shamelessly headlined "How Daring Midnight Ballet Brought Back Pfc. Jessica From The Enemy's Evil Clutches" and went on to describe Lynch's rescue as something out of a Tom Clancy novel (Latham and Sujo). It was not surprising that both the government and the media made an exceedingly big deal out of such an incident. It is not uncommon for a disproportionate amount of attention to be paid to a figure in current events who stands out by being young, attractive, and female. This treatment of Lynch's story evokes memories of a similar event that was also tremendously sentimentalized: the Central Park Jogger case. Like the story of the Jogger, in which a young woman was brutally attacked in the park in 1989, Jessica Lynch's story ballooned, thanks to a number of factors, from the wealth of article titles that played off Saving Private Ryan and Kissing Jessica Stein, to the iconic photo of a smiling Jessica in her fatigues against a backdrop of the American flag.

In her essay "Sentimental Journeys," which examines the Jogger incident, Joan Didion writes, "Crimes are universally understood to be news to the extent that they offer, however erroneously, a story, a lesson, a higher concept" (255-256). The Jessica Lynch incident was a story better than fiction, and the media was determined to tell that story for maximum effect. It tugged heartstrings by voyaging beyond Lynch's capture and rescue, delving into the heart and soul of the petite blonde who wanted

to be an elementary school teacher, just as fourteen years earlier the media had highlighted the jogger's "top-notch work" and her fun-loving personality (Didion 253). The two women, both undue victims and miraculous survivors, were turned into symbols—the jogger of what was right with New York, and Lynch of what was right with America. The story of Jessica Lynch's ordeal, replete with teary-eyed mothers and picture-perfect reunion, ranks right up there with the Central Park Jogger's story as one of the most sentimental narratives in recent memory.

In "Sentimental Journeys," Didion claims, "cases are widely regarded by the American reporters as windows on the city or culture in which they take place" (308). Jayson Blair, the *New York Times* reporter who was later accused of plagiarism, used Lynch's story as a window into Appalachia. In an article that he claimed was based on interviews with Lynch, Blair wrote:

> Mr. Lynch seemed distracted as he stood on the porch of his hilltop home here looking into the tobacco fields and pastures. He talked about the satellite television service that brought CNN and other cable news networks into his home, his family's long history of military service and the poor condition of the local economy. ("Relatives")

Its promise of giving Americans insight into a region of the country few people knew much about was one of the reasons why Jessica Lynch's story was a media goldmine. Reporters edged their way into the tight-knit Lynch family, invading their home in an attempt to show the rest of the country about the environment from which Jessica hailed. The "opportunity to enter not only households but parts of the culture normally closed" was another factor that made the Lynch case so susceptible to becoming a sentimental, overexposed narrative (Didion 308).

But Lynch's story has another aspect to it, besides being an archetypal tale about the trials and tribulations of a young white female and a window into a relatively unseen culture: it's a war story. Lynch was fashioned into the type of propagandist symbol that has long characterized American military conflicts. In "From Realism to Virtual Reality: Images of America's Wars," H. Bruce Franklin discusses the historical use of these propaganda techniques, which have proven to be especially potent in controversial wars such as those in Vietnam and Iraq. Lynch's ordeal not only helped garner support for US involvement in Iraq, but it embedded in the minds of Americans a concrete image of the people who had been deployed there. Lynch was an example of how the government wanted all soldiers to be seen: as kind and caring, patriotic and passionate.

Furthermore, Lynch helped show that the military was not a selfish institution that sent young people towards danger or death without giving them something in return. The military had done great things for Jessica Lynch: it had provided her with a means of escape from stifling, rural West Virginia; it had allowed her to travel the world; and

it would fund a college education that would enable her better to serve society. She was the perfect symbol of all that could be gained from joining the military. The US Army could not have picked a better poster girl.

When the celebration over Lynch's rescue died down, it became evident that many of the "facts" in the story were closer to fiction. For example, injuries that the Pentagon claimed Lynch sustained by fighting against Iraqi soldiers turned out to be the result of a Hummer crash. Furthermore, Lynch had been "imprisoned" in a hospital devoid of Iraqi military personnel, where she was assigned the only specialist bed in the hospital and one of only two nurses on the floor (Kampfner). Confronted with public distrust in both itself and the Pentagon, the media were driven to reexamine what had occurred.

Revisiting the details of this incident allowed the media to prove its commitment to the truth. The *New York Times* tackled the alteration of Lynch's story in an article correcting the untruths propagated by Jayson Blair. In the correction, Jessica Lynch's sister Brandi said that Blair's assertion that tobacco fields and cattle pastures were visible from the porch of the Lynch home was completely false ("Correcting the Record"). By drawing attention to such inaccuracies, the *New York Times* convinced its readers that it was concerned with the truth, and that all the propaganda machines and corrupt journalists in the world would not stop it from continuing to serve the reader; the newspaper came off as honorable, despite the fact that it had misled the public in the first place.

Other media outlets criticized not themselves but their peers in their attempt to gain the public's trust. When CBS was criticized for pitching a massive multimedia deal to Lynch's family while she was still hospitalized, the network defended itself by saying, "Unlike the *New York Times*' own ethical problems, there is no question about the accuracy or integrity of CBS News' reporting" (Haberman). Some of the proposed ideas that made CBS so desperate for the rights to tell Lynch's story included a TV movie through its "movie division, which specializes in inspirational stories of courage" (Haberman) and an MTV concert in Lynch's honor, to be aired from her hometown. While CBS might not have committed outright plagiarism, their aggression, their shameless pursuit of the story's rights, and their apparent determination to make a profit from the incident were far from innocent. But through the use of statements that insulted the *New York Times*, CBS helped detract the blame from itself and disguise the fact that it was just as eager as Blair to sentimentalize and sensationalize Lynch's story.

Newspapers and networks are not the only ones to have twisted the truth about Lynch's rescue. By having a hidden camera film the Navy SEALS operation that released Lynch from the Iraqi hospital, the military did just as much to make Lynch's rescue into an exciting story as any network. As one writer put it,

> It was like a Hollywood film. [The soliders] cried, 'Go, go, go', with guns and blanks and the sound of explosions. They made a show—an action movie like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan, with jumping and shouting, breaking down doors. All the time with the camera rolling. (Kampfner)

Many people were angered by the excessive importance placed on taping the rescue, as Franklin argues, reflecting their disapproval of the role of photographers and videographers in the midst of war. He describes a comic book published after the Vietnam War that depicted photojournalists as villains screaming "Keep shooting, keep shooting!" (Franklin 61). This double entendre criticizes the emphasis placed on getting good images, a goal that can overshadow the true purpose of a mission. The Pentagon's determination to videotape Lynch's rescue, and its similar resolve to acquire high-quality photos and videos of the conflict in Vietnam, suggest that the military's priorities lay not so much in the actual conduct of war but in its portrayal. The military is just as much at fault as the networks for turning war into a sometimes heartwarming, sometimes horrific narrative.

Jessica Lynch's story will be retold in November 2003, when NBC's made-for-TV movie *Saving Private Lynch* is broadcast into homes across America. Movies have long been used to change our ideas of historical events, and, as Franklin notes, such movies and stories are "an effective vehicle for romanticizing and popularizing war" (53). Many movies about the Vietnam War, for example, sought to "reverse the roles of victim and victimizer" (59) and to "radically [reimagine] the war" (57). The pervasive feeling surrounding *Saving Private Lynch*, as expressed in an abundance of news articles in the fall of 2003, is that the movie will likely veer from reality.

To defend itself, the media has directly addressed this negative publicity. The writer of the script said in an interview:

> I had to give the network attorneys the information in every scene as to what exact magazine, what exact article, what page I got the content from. That went to the legal department with a photocopy of the articles. They then would double- and triple-check what version could be O.K. to use. ("Saving Private Lynch")

Fasano's disclaimer-filled comments, in which he goes so far as to say "Please . . . Don't shoot the messenger," seek to defend the media's versions of events ("Saving Private Lynch"). But while this version may claim to be painstakingly researched, when the movie airs we will likely be presented with a sensationalized, twisted story. No one is going to make a movie about an America POW in no imminent danger, being given TLC by Iraqi nurses, which is the plotline that the facts about Lynch's capture actually point to. The history of war movies, as Franklin says, is a history of skewed reality, and *Saving Private Lynch* is not expected to be any different.

Criticizing the truth-twisting tactics employed by the government gave both the public and the media an opportunity to make opinionated statements about the conflict in Iraq. In a time when the Dixie Chicks were vilified for one anti-Bush comment, attacking the Lynch incident was safer than attacking the country, government, or president in general. Analyzing the holes in the story was a way of expressing disapproval of the war. Just as Jessica Lynch was a positive symbol for the war and the military, the skewing of her story became a negative symbol for the lies surrounding the war. Throughout the course of the war, numerous statements of arguable legitimacy had been thrown at the American public, mainly concerning Iraq's possession of chemical and biological weapons. Many people expressed their general outrage at these widespread lies by focusing on the Lynch case as a specific example of this deception.

In a *New York Times* editorial, Nicholas Kristof wrote that the public had been "misled" by reports that Lynch had fired at her captors, that she had been seriously injured, etc., commenting that, "As a citizen, I deeply resent my government trying to spin me like a Ping-Pong ball" ("Saving Private Jessica"). The resentment of this one event, as expressed in the numerous editorials and letters like Kristof's, allowed people to vocalize their overall resentment of the war. Lynch's ordeal became a sounding board for those who felt the war itself was unjust.

As new facts come to light, and Jessica Lynch's story is retold in new ways, the media's portrayal of the story has been challenged. Perhaps the greatest power to retell the story belongs to Lynch herself. Lynch, who recently was honorably discharged from the army, has already signed a book deal. The Central Park Jogger, who came forth and identified herself as a woman named Trisha Meili, told her story in last year's memoir, *I Am The Central Park Jogger*. We cannot know in advance whether Lynch's account of her ordeal will veer towards sentimentality or hard cold facts, whether it will exalt or denounce the US military. But a story is a multi-dimensional object, a confluence of many sources of information. The stories of Lynch and Meili are already engraved in our minds in ways that their own words may be powerless to alter. When the media presents us with a packaged story that is complete with excitement and closure, then a woman suffering from amnesia (like both Lynch and Meili), despite her position as the story's heroine, is almost powerless to unwrap that package and shine her on what's inside.

Jessica Lynch has been called many things: an icon, a heroine, a "wholesome West Virginia country girl" (Linda Davies, qtd. in Jehl and Blair). In the years to come her story will no doubt be told and retold, made into legend and attacked with fervor. But what will not change, regardless of the books published and movies made, is the power the incident had over the American public in 2003, as our country engaged in a conflict that promised to end quickly but instead dragged on mercilessly. As both a propaganda tool and a sentimental narrative, Lynch demonstrated just how capable the government and media are of selling us an alternative version of the truth. Cases like

hers might harm our trust in reported news, but considering our insatiable appetite for great stories, we cannot expect the news to cut back on how much fiction it reports as fact. The next time we go to war, or the next time a young woman survives a harrowing ordeal, the truth will no doubt continue to be molded and manipulated to our liking. That is how it has been for hundreds of years, and how it will continue to be.

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