

## BATTLE OF THE AGES

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[Assignment: Our examination of war and its influence on social values has relied primarily on fiction and non-fiction prose statements. Other responses to war, of course, also suggest useful ways of looking at reality. Photographs from World War II not only recorded historic events, but implied certain beliefs about what was valuable and provocative. Less subtly, government posters offered public instruction to all citizens on how to support the war effort. The photographs and propaganda posters provide different messages for us perhaps than they did for observers fifty years ago, but they are worth close consideration nonetheless. In this essay: 1. Select any one photograph or poster or cartoon as your subject. Identify a theme that the picture suggests. 2. Imagine a reader who has not seen your subject and must rely on your representation of it. 3. Describe the picture in such a manner that its essential details are specifically represented. 4. Explain how the picture treats the theme (for instance, love, hope, despair) and how that treatment is informative to you and your audience.]

In many of the war novels I have read, there is a reoccurring theme of lost innocence. Whether it be Henry Fleming in Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage or Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughter House Five, one can not help but notice how the tragedies of war can affect a human being, physically and psychologically. War has the power to speed up the aging of a boy into a man. Two photographs I find especially poignant are of soldiers that are obviously at different times in their lives. One photograph is of a very young sailor, and the other is of an aged general--two photographs that are so different, but ironically share very much in common. Each photograph tells its own story, but I believe that the stories of the young sailor and the old general are connected in some way.

The young sailor is wide-eyed and full of hope. By the gleeful grin he has on his face it seems as though he has just recently finished boot camp. He is new to military life because he is wearing a very normal-looking button-down shirt and a white sailor cap, for he has not earned medals or stripes. He has a look of accomplishment and a sense of purpose. He is still glowing with excitement because he and his buddies are finally finished with the many weeks of being dragged through the mud. This particular sailor looks like he is smaller than his peers, as though there were a mistake made and the Navy accidentally let a fifteen-year-old kid enlist. Even though he may be the smallest of his class, the bigger and older guys don't give him any trouble because they know that he has had a tougher time getting used to the life of a soldier. The young sailor can't run as fast or lift as much as his mates, but he always gives it his all. He's the kind of guy next store, a regular Joe. The young sailor looks like the All-American boy that any mother would be proud to call "Son." Perhaps he's the oldest of the children in his family, always teaching the little ones right from wrong. He might be the schoolmate that came to the rescue when a bully was picking on someone.

The innocent look in "The Kid's" eyes shows how little he knows of the future to come, for he has his entire life ahead of him. A few days after the picture was taken the young sailor will be given his orders. The government will send him off to some far-away land that he knows

little about to fight in a war he knows even less about. Throughout the course of war "The Kid" will become a man and bridge the gap between the young sailor and the old general in the second photograph.

The second photograph is of a weathered and aged army general. He is wearing a cap with the Army emblem on the front. The general is cupping his jaw with his hand, contemplating the events in his life. The blank stare shows how engrossed in thought the traveled soldier is, maybe not even knowing his picture is being taken. In his mind he is taken back to when he was a young private a little wet behind the ears, remembering the person he once was and the person he is now. His dead-pan expression makes it seem as though he is lost in time; thinking of all the "woulda," "shoulda," "coulda's" in his life. Perhaps he is recalling the first bombing raid, the first time he saw a man die in battle, the first time he got caught up in some really heavy artillery and nearly lost his life. He especially remembers the first life he took. It was his third day in the trenches and the Germans were finally attacking; he let off a clean shot at one of the oncoming soldiers and down the German went. He doesn't recall feeling any remorse because he knew that the German wouldn't be the last person he would kill.

From the many lines on the general's face you can tell that he is a man that has seen and done it all. He may be thinking how his life would be different if he had never gotten drafted and lived the life of your ordinary husband and father. How different would it be coming home after a nine-to-fiver and relaxing in front of the radio, with his son and daughter playing and running around the house? A career military man doesn't get such privileges as seeing his children grow up, or sleeping next to his wife every night. He has provided for his family the best way he knows how, even though he has never really been there for them. Getting a letter from Dad at Christmas time is hard for a child to understand. Now that the old general will be retiring soon, he hopes he can make up for lost time with his children that are adults with their own kids. Hopefully it is not too late.

The two photographs show two different men at opposite times in their lives, but they share a very real bond. They have been adopted into a life they must learn to live with. The general is a sage from whom the young sailor could learn many things. The general can help the sailor deal with the obstacles that the sailor will someday face. The young sailor can help the old man look at the world through the eyes of a child, helping the general recapture some of the innocence that was lost long ago on a nameless battlefield somewhere. The young sailor also gives hope to the old general. The old man hopes that the "The Kid" will become a fine man and not only provide for his family, but be there for them. He hopes that some day when he is as old as the general, that he doesn't have any regrets, so that when he loses himself in time he can say that he is happy with the life he has chosen.