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From sicily 1943, to IRAQ 2003 : Resisting the Enlisting of John Hersey's A Bell for Adano as Propaganda for the American Empire

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FROM SICILY 1943, TO IRAQ 2003

Resisting the Enlisting of John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano* as Propaganda for the American Empire

This essay began some years ago when, at a friend's house, I absent-mindedly picked up from a large stack of newspapers and magazines an old, 2003 copy of *The Atlantic*, a publication I normally never read. The issue featured an essay by Robert Kaplan lamenting the fact that—notwithstanding all the debates concerning the ‘American Empire’—the ‘practical ways of managing it’ had never been adequately discussed. Trying to fill up this troublesome gap in imperial management, Kaplan listed ten rules that represented ‘a distillation of my own experience and conversations with diplomats and military officers I have met in recent travels on four continents, and on military bases around the United States’ (Kaplan, 2003). Rule number one was quizzically entitled ‘Produce more Joppolos.’ The Italian name intrigued me, though I could hardly guess what the author was referring to, given that the only Joppolo I knew at the time was a small seaside town in Calabria. Now, since Joppolo is quite a pleasant vacation site with a splendid view of the Mediterranean and a nice beach, I thought maybe Kaplan was suggesting that American soldiers—today’s ‘imperial grunts,’ as he calls them in the title of one of his most recent books—should be provided with better R & R facilities, though I could hardly believe Joppolo had suddenly risen to international fame as a much-coveted holiday resort. It turned out, of course, that I was on a completely wrong track.

The Joppolo in Kaplan's article was the protagonist of a 1944 novel by John Hersey entitled *A Bell for Adano*, dealing with

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the Allied invasion of Italy that began in early July, 1943. The reason why *The Atlantic* correspondent liked Major Victor Joppolo so much was that, as an intelligent American Civil Affairs officer of Italian descent, this US officer manages to win the hearts and minds of the population of the Sicilian town of which he becomes the de facto Mayor by paying little or no attention to abstract directives from bureaucrats, generals, and politicians, choosing, instead, to follow his own best instincts. Identified by Hersey as an essentially 'good man,' Joppolo is, as one critic has written, '[a] man of patience and integrity with a concern for honesty and justice ... [who] feels that only simple good works reaching those at the bottom will reconstruct ravaged Italy' (Diggins, 1966: 607). Before I say something more about Major Joppolo and Hersey's novel, however, I would like to go back for a moment to Kaplan's piece, by quoting the opening sentence of the 'Produce More Joppolos' section of his article. 'When I asked Major Paul S. Warren, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, home of the Army's Special Operations Command, what serves as the model for a civil-affairs officer within the Special Operations forces, he said, "Read John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano*—it's all there"' (Kaplan, 2003). If one is to believe what Kaplan writes, it would appear that a novel which, despite achieving fame at the time of its publication has by now virtually disappeared from most accounts of American literature, is alive and well at Special Operations headquarters, where it provides inspiration for the administrators of the US's 'global empire'—'an empire different from Britain's and Rome's but an empire nonetheless' (Kaplan, 2003).

As I rushed to order a used copy of Hersey's novel from Amazon.com, I discovered that this business of producing more Joppolos was taken seriously not only at Fort Bragg and *The Atlantic*. In a piece appearing in the May-June 2004 issue of the *Military Review* entitled 'Preparing Leaders for Nation Building,' US Army Lieutenant Colonel Patrick J. Donahoe began his argument by quoting approvingly Kaplan's number one rule for 'managing the world,' going on to suggest that if the US wanted to be successful in its double mission of fighting global terrorism and promoting nation-building, it better 'send more Joppolos to Iraq' (Donahoe, 2004: 24). Even though the use of the adjective

'more' is disingenuous on Donahoe's part, as his article shows that in actual fact the US army can hardly claim to have even a single true Joppolo on the Iraqi soil, unlike Kaplan, who provides only a sketchy summary of Hersey's novel, Donahoe discusses *A Bell for Adano* in some detail, so as to convince his audience that, indeed, as he puts it in the last sentence of his essay, 'the Army needs more leaders like Victor Joppolo' (Donahoe 2004: 26).

From what I have said so far, a number of interesting points begin to emerge. Here are four questions that I think are especially worth asking.

1) What should we make of the fact that, despite a US history of military involvement around the planet that is more than a century old, the only 'model' available on how to handle civil affairs in occupied war zones comes from a work of fiction and, to boot, a work which—even though it received the Pulitzer Prize in 1945 and was later turned into a successful Broadway play and an equally successful Hollywood movie—was from the start greeted by most critics as a rather modest novel?¹

2) Major Warren, Lieutenant Donahoe, and Robert Kaplan all seem to believe that it is possible to apply the lessons learned during the Allied invasion of Sicily in 1943 to the completely different historical, cultural, and political scenario of the so-called GWT—the Global War on Terror. Leaving aside that whatever les-

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1. The movie, released in 1945 and distributed by Twentieth Century Fox, was directed by Henry King and starred John Hodiak and Gene Tierney. The Broadway play was directed by Paul Osborn, and starred Fredric March as Victor Joppolo. Reviewing Hersey's novel in the *New York Times*, Jerre Mangione praised its main character's 'wonderful zeal for spreading democracy' and its author's 'crisp easy style,' but also noted that the novel was not a 'great one, and there will undoubtedly be more profound novels written about the war.' Similarly, Diana Trilling's review in *The Nation* appreciates, to an extent, Hersey's 'folk idealism,' but she also complains that 'someone in a position to boast a more complicated view of things' subjects his ideas to 'a process of conscious, falsifying, and purposeful simplification.' She also noted in passing that 'there is very little writing talent in *A Bell for Adano*' (Feb. 12). In a later article, published again in *The Nation* after the novel had received the Pulitzer prize, Diana Trilling wrote that she had been rereading Hersey's book, 'to find it even more primitive than I had remembered.... [T]he Pulitzer committee has again chosen a novel that can scarcely give pleasure to people who take literature seriously' (May 26).

sons there may be to learn from Hersey are in the form of fictional discourse, isn't it bizarre that top military figures and leading political commentators are nearly blind to such important historical and cultural differences at the same moment that they invoke the model of Joppolo as someone who was successful in his mission *precisely* by virtue of his ability to understand the nuances of the cultural context in which he was operating?

3) From a more strictly literary perspective, what does this military interest in *A Bell for Adano* tell us about this novel? Should we interpret it as a further proof that, as Andrew Buchanan has recently argued, even the sincere liberal humanitarianism framing Hersey's account of the occupation of Italy in 1943 is implicated in 'the formation of the redemptive, muscular, and interventionist ideologies that would coalesce in Cold War internationalism' (Buchanan, 2008: 219)? Or, to put it differently, is Kaplan, a staunch supporter of the legitimacy of the American Empire, justified in claiming Hersey's novel for an imperial project that cannot only rest on the muscles of Special Forces, but must also always 'win the confidence of local rulers' (Kaplan, 2003)?

4) If, as I believe, whatever its ideological and artistic flaws, *A Bell for Adano* should not be read as a text that straightforwardly promotes cultural and political imperialism, what has been missed by previous readings of Hersey's novel? In other words, what is that both a 'military' interpretation like Donahoe's and one attentive to the novel's ideological framework, fail to grasp about *A Bell for Adano*?

Questions number one and two are obviously very broad ones, and cannot be adequately tackled here. I will therefore devote only a few sketchy remarks to them, reserving more space for the last two more specifically literary questions by providing a couple of examples of the ways in which the cultural, or better trans-cultural, implications of Hersey's novel implicitly call into question its self-proclaimed ideological framework.

From the Philippines of a hundred or so years ago to present-day Afghanistan and Iraq, the US army has repeatedly acted as an occupying force in various countries around the world. Yet, judging from both Kaplan's and Donahoe's pieces, it would appear that there is not one single journal, autobiography, biography,

personal memoir, or any other kind of written document providing a truly workable and inspiring model for Civil Affairs officers other than Hersey's Victor Joppolo. Rather than wondering about this peculiar circumstance and contemplating the possibility that the virtual absence of Joppolos both in fiction and in real life may be a sign that it is the reality of military occupation itself that undermines the notion of an ideal mediating/reconciling figure between occupants and occupied, the Joppolo figure continues to be invoked regardless of the huge historical, political, cultural, and indeed military differences separating the 1943 occupation of Sicily from today's invasion of Iraq. Put another way, rather than wondering what exceptional conditions may have made possible the emergence of a unique kind of literary character like Joppolo, military officers like Warren and Donahoe, and cheerleaders of the American Empire like Kaplan, all believe that the 'making' of actual, flesh-and-blood Joppolos is only a matter of will and careful planning. From this point of view it is definitely worth noticing that neither Donahoe nor Kaplan even bother to mention that the Joppolo figure was inspired by an actually existing American Major, Frank E. Toscani, who served as AMGOT officer in the Sicilian town of Licata, from July to September 1943.² Perhaps, the first thing one should do is ascertain how much of what Joppolo manages to do in the pages of Hersey's novel was matched in real life by Toscani, but it is quite obvious that, to paraphrase the immortal line in a famous Western, when the choice is between historical facts and legend, the likes of Kaplan always prefer to believe in the latter and disregard the former.³

Speaking of Westerns, it is no exaggeration to say that Kaplan thinks of Joppolo as a sort of wise sheriff operating on the nineteenth-century American frontier rather than in the Sicily of 1943. Kaplan likes the Joppolo figure so much that, besides mentioning him in *The Atlantic* article with which I began, he resorts to a passage from Hersey's novel as the number one epigraph

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2. AMGOT stands for Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories.

3. The Western in question is of course *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Paramount, 1962), and the exact line goes: 'This is the west, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.'

for his 2007 book *Imperial Grunts*. My first reaction on seeing the quotation was that Kaplan's gesture was yet another attempt to appropriate, via Hersey's novel, the moral capital of World War II. As Marilyn Young has eloquently argued,

There are, it seems, only two kinds of war the United States can fight: World War II or Vietnam. Anything that can be made to look like World War II is OK. But since the conditions for World War II cannot be replicated, most wars run the danger of being or becoming Vietnam (Young, 2003).

However, even though from time to time Kaplan in his book does invoke the World War II paradigm, the most significant framework for his argument is revealed by the title of his introductory chapter: *Injun Country*. While the occasional nods to World War II are clearly meant to provide his argument in favour of Empire with a moral rationale, just as the proverbially 'Good War' has become synonymous with Just War, the imagery of the frontier and the Indian Wars aims at reassuring the imperial grunts that their dirty work is part of a quintessential, mythical 'American experience.' Yet not once in his voluminous book does Kaplan raise the issue of how the Joppolo figure—who exists in a world that has nothing whatsoever to do with that of the Wild West—may function in a context where the enemy is not a demoralized and inept Italian army, but the contemporary counterparts of fierce, unfriendly 'Injuns.' Or, to put it another way, how come the US army had no Joppolos serving on the Plains against Crazy Horse?

Unlike Kaplan, Donahoe makes an effort to trace more closely the main features of the Joppolo figure by carefully enumerating all the qualities that the prospective Civil Affair officers operating in the Middle East would need to have, beginning with language skills and a knowledge of Islamic culture and history that, Donahoe candidly admits, precious few American soldiers possess. Indeed, Donahoe acknowledges that in one sense the US army is unlikely to come by any true Joppolo, as there are virtually no Iraqi-American or Afghani-American soldiers in the forces dispatched to the Middle East, and 'since the Army cannot draft men like Victor Joppolo ... it must build them' (25).

Leaving aside the fact that even the strongest critic of essentialism would probably acknowledge that the idea of ‘building’ an Afghani- or Iraqi-American borders on the absurd, the reason why there were plenty of Italian-Americans serving in the US Army during World War II cannot be ascribed only to the fact that they were forced to do so by the obligatory draft system. Many Italian Americans, like the fictional Joppolo and the real Frank Toscani, were fully assimilated and were happy to serve, seeing no contradiction between their Italian roots and their loyalty to the US. On a different plane, there can be no question that what made the Joppolo figure possible to begin with was the special status of ‘second-rate enemy’ accorded to the Italians by the Allies. As *The Soldier’s Guide to Italy* put it, the objective was to ‘treat the Italians differently from the Germans.’ By acting with ‘moderation and tact,’ the Allies would ‘gain the future confidence and support of the Italian people in [their] effort to restore world order’ (as quoted in Buchanan, 2008: 223). While relations between the Allied troops and Italians were by no means always idyllic, the fact that Italians quickly went from being by and large incompetent enemies, to semi-allies, and finally to full-blown (though still second-rate) allies in the space of a few months makes the Italian World War II scenario rather unique.⁴

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This is not to say that there are no analogies whatsoever between the situation of Sicily in 1943 and today’s Iraq. One could argue, for example, that in both cases the American army intervened to topple a dictatorship and help re-establish social and political conditions conducive to democratic rule. Yet, Italy was at war with the US while Iraq was *not*. Many, perhaps most Iraqis were undoubtedly happy to see Saddam Hussein fall, just as many Italians were happy to see the Fascist regime go, but it would be hard to deny that while by and large the Allies were perceived by Italians as contributing to the liberation of their country, most Iraqis did *not* see US troops in that light. This is hardly surprising: Italy was at the time *de facto* under German occupation, and the Allies were in the eyes of most Italians

4. For a non-academic, though informative, account of Italian life during the Allied occupation, see Bracalini.

those who would help them get rid of the Nazis. The Iraqis were *not* under foreign occupation until the arrival of the 'coalition forces.' Finally, there is the cultural and especially the *religious* issue. The Allies belonged to countries like the United States, with manifold cultural and historical ties to Italy and European civilization in general, and were for the most part Christian. In Hersey's novel, one of the first things Major Joppolo does in Adano is to attend Sunday Mass, as he has the advantage of being both Italian and Catholic. I have heard of no US officer in either Afghanistan or Iraq going to Friday prayer with the locals. I have no figures regarding the percentage of Muslim soldiers dispatched to these war zones, but it is safe to guess it must be extremely low.

A closer look at the novel will show how great is the distance between the Sicily of 1943 and the Iraq of six-plus decades later. There can be hardly any question that Hersey's viewpoint is a liberal, yet heavily paternalistic one. Kaplan's appropriation of *A Bell for Adano* is therefore at least partly justified. Joppolo is often condescending in his attempts to teach the locals what democracy is, as if Italians had no home-grown democratic traditions of their own. Moreover, the American Major is for the most part surrounded by one-dimensional Italian characters taking part in what critics have described as an '*opéra bouffe*' (Gisolfi, 1950: 201) or a 'veritable Sicilian minstrel show' (Buchanan, 2008: 229). And yet, while the political message that Hersey wished to disseminate with his novel is made absolutely clear in the book's preface, there are certain ways in which the text may be said to resist its explicit ideological agenda. For example, even though, as John Diggins has noted, 'Hersey's narrow American point of view failed to convey the heavy effects of Fascism and war on the Italian people, their unquiet desperation and bewilderment during the liberation, and the bitter hatred that often existed between Italians and American soldiers' (Diggins, 1966: 608), from the very beginning Hersey hints at the ambiguous nature of Joppolo as victorious liberator of Adano and yet at the same time its conqueror (his name is, after all, Victor). First his assistant Borth jokingly remarks that, except for his moustache, Joppolo 'look[s] quite a lot like Mussolini.' Borth tries to deflate the Major's wish 'to do

so much' for the town by asking Joppolo, 'Will it be okay with you to be a Mussolini?' (Hersey, 1944: 9).

These implicit warnings against the dangers of absolute power, even when exercised with good intentions, may not amount to much, but it is interesting that the theme of conquest is raised again a couple of pages later, when the usher Zito replies with 'a beautiful lie' to the Major's inquiry about a 'big picture' hanging over his desk. Zito's sly answer—'That, Mister Major, is Columbus discovering America'—is meant to cover up the politically embarrassing content of the picture's true theme, 'a scene from the Sicilian Vespers, that bloody revolt which the Sicilians mounted against a previous invader' (Hersey, 1944: 13).⁵ Zito prefers to direct the Major's attention to the figure of a conqueror like Columbus who, being Italian and yet virtually 'American,' provides an ideal mediating figure between Italy and the US. Whatever we may think of Columbus today, at the time he was certainly commonly perceived as a bearer of civilization rather than a usurper. Furthermore his image calls forth a much friendlier scenario than the one evoked by the actual subject of the painting which, however, hovers in the background suggesting, in Hersey's own words, that the Americans may well be perceived by the locals as yet another invading force.

The ambiguous status of the American army is once again emphasized when the bell that gives the novel its title is discussed for the first time by Joppolo and a group of Adano's citizens. It appears, rather implausibly, that the town's number one priority is not feeding the people (as only 'the fat Craxi' insists) but getting back the clock tower bell taken by Mussolini to make weapons. Insisting that the town 'needs a bell more than anything,' the local sulphur magnate Cacopardo recalls that 'by this bell the people were warned of the invasion of Roberto King of Naples, and he was driven back' (Hersey, 1944: 19), as well as that 'the bell warned the people when Admiral Tar-

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5. The Sicilian Vespers, which took place in Sicily in 1282, is the name given to a rebellion against the French/Angevin king Charles I, who had occupied the island with the Pope's consent in 1266. The name 'Vespers' come from the fact that the uprising began after the evening prayer of Easter Monday, March 30, 1282, at the Chiesa dello Spirito Santo, in Palermo.

got brought his French and his Turks to the place and burned many homes and churches' (Hersey, 1944: 20), only to conclude that 'the bell did not warn us of *this* invasion, or we would have been in the streets with flowers to welcome you' (20). Much as he wants to oblige his new boss, Cacopardo cannot help but label the arrival of the Americans as an invasion, and, more importantly, he implicitly reminds Joppolo that Sicilians have always resisted all attempts to be conquered.⁶

This is a point worth emphasizing since much is usually made of the fact that Joppolo does not want to get just any bell for Adano. He wants 'a bell with a meaning,' 'a Liberty Bell' (Hersey, 1944: 32). Also Major Toscani took to heart this bell business, but as shown by the historical record, he was happy to arrange for the transport of two local church bells to replace the missing one in the municipal tower.⁷ Joppolo, instead, clearly sees the bell as a concrete symbol of the American gift of democracy to a reborn and redeemed Italian nation. Yet, in recalling that the Liberty Bell 'is the bell the Americans rang when they declared themselves free from the British' (32), Joppolo is not so much raising once again the possibility that the Americans might be the ones Italians would like to be free from; it's more that the American Major seems to be echoing Cacopardo's claims for Adano's original, and much older, bell. In light of Cacopardo's history lesson, the experience of resistance to tyranny and inva-

6. The irony of these scenes may appear innocently mild, and yet the fact that they were excised in the film version of the novel sounds like a confirmation of their critical edge. This may be also the place to recall that another important scene was left out in the movie—the one in which some drunken American soldiers destroy the furniture of the house where they are quartered, leading the owner of the house to protest to Joppolo that 'The Germans never did anything in this town as your men have done' (135). Moreover, the film version also cleaned up the language of those characters Hersey cast in a negative light, from Captain Purvis' sexist remarks on Italian women to General Marvin's racial slurs against Italians, and Joppolo in particular ('lousy, sonafabitching, little wop' [236]).

7. For a description of Toscani's activity in Licata, including a brief comparison with Hersey's Joppolo, see Li Gotti 45–61. Hersey chose a Southern last name for his hero, but in the novel Joppolo claims his parents migrated to America from Tuscany, as if to implicitly evoke the real-life figure on whom the character is based.

sion that Joppolo associates with the Liberty Bell can no longer be said to be unique to America. America's Liberty Bell is more a copy than an improvement over Adano's original bell. Moreover, no matter how much democracy was often presented at the time as a specifically Anglo-Saxon achievement, as Joppolo tells the citizens from Adano, the words on the Liberty Bell come from Leviticus: 'Proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all inhabitants thereof' (Hersey, 1944: 253). American liberty appears to have some unmistakably Mediterranean roots.

One final remark about the bell. In the novel it is donated to Joppolo by the Navy, and taken from the USS *Corelli*. There is a symbolic reason to this. 'Captain Corelli, the guy it was named for ... did something in the last war over here in the Mediterranean. Italy was our ally then, you know' (Hersey, 1944: 209). Later it is revealed that in actual fact Vincent Corelli's act of heroism took place in the North Atlantic, where his destroyer saved the entire crew from a sinking Italian freighter, but the main point remains. The American gift bears an Italian imprint, in as much as Italians have always somehow been a part of America, from Columbus onwards. One may argue that it is mostly 'Americanized' Italians like Corelli and Joppolo who can strike an heroic pose in Hersey's narrative, and yet America is described as being hardly beyond reproach. The book ends with the dismissal of Major Joppolo at the hands of the insufferable and obtuse General Marvin (a fictional Patton), for having dared to countermand his orders prohibiting carts from being allowed into town. The circulation of carts is rightly deemed by Joppolo as essential to the town's livelihood. It is no exaggeration to say that nearly all the good he manages to accomplish in Adano hangs on his refusal to submit to Marvin's irrational and irresponsible orders. It is certainly ironic that a novel notable for its main character's 'wonderful zeal in spreading democracy' ends with his dismissal at the hands of an authoritarian, racist, and indeed Mussolinian figure.⁸

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8. This apparently was not what happened to the real-life Major Frank Toscani. However, the historical record does show that he was liked by the local population and that, in gratitude for the work he had done on behalf of the town, he was treated by the Town Council to a farewell banquet also featured in Hersey's novel.

Interestingly enough, this cart business is simply ignored in Donahoe's article, whereas Kaplan devotes to it one line, as just one more item in the list of all the things that Joppolo does to get the town of Adano back on its feet, but never mentioning that this act finally costs the Major his job. I do not wish to make too much of the novel's critique of Marvin's bigotry, narrow-mindedness, and ill temper. However, if, as Hersey wrote in his introduction, Joppolo 'was a good man, though weak in certain attractive, human ways, and what he did and what he was not able to do in Adano represented in miniature what America can and cannot do in Europe' (Hersey, 1944: 1), the novel shows that the real threat to the humane liberalism advocated by Hersey through Joppolo does not come from outside, but from the inside—from the US Army itself. More importantly, perhaps, the novel points to a fundamental contradiction any invading Army, no matter how benign its intentions, must face. When General Marvin foams at the mouth against the 'goddam Italians [who] think they're going to stop a bunch of goddam tanks with a bunch of goddam wooden carts' (Hersey, 1944: 50), he shows how war always depends on the construction of an enemy figure who must by definition be denied equal dignity and equal rights. And yet the problem is not, as Commander General Anthony Zinni—quoted by Donahoe—would have it, 'that on the one hand you must kill somebody, on the other you must feed somebody' (Donahoe, 2004: 25). If you are part of an Army claiming to bring freedom and democracy to the invaded country, the 'somebody' you need to kill and yet you need to feed can be hardly construed as two different, easily separable people. In order to kill you are likely to accept all the negative images of the enemy fed to you by the propaganda and the general culture, even though those images are obviously and inevitably going to interfere with your supposed commitment to the cause of redeeming an oppressed population.

Again, I do not wish to argue that Hersey's critique is particularly biting or profound, but I do believe it is important to stress that in a novel criticized—and rightly so—for being unable to show the ugly face of Italian Fascism, the only character who behaves Fascistically is the head of the invading army. In his preface, after

praising America as 'the international country,' Hersey writes, somewhat sentimentally, that as America is 'on its way to Europe,' a kind of reverse migration might take place. 'Just as truly as once Europe invaded us with wave after wave of immigrants, now we are invading Europe with wave after wave of sons of immigrants' (Hersey, 1944: 2). There is certainly something naïve about Hersey's dream and yet it is hard for me to imagine that, were he alive today, Major Joppolo would be rushing to Iraq, Afghanistan, or some other war zone with the same enthusiasm he displayed some decades ago as he landed on the shores of Sicily. But perhaps, rather than asking what is ultimately a foolish question, or wondering why the US Army has so much trouble finding any Joppolos willing to enlist, as a student of literature I guess it is more interesting to pose a different question. Why is there no contemporary equivalent of *A Bell for Adano*? If there are no *A Minaret for Falluja* or *A Muezzin for Kandahar* to parallel Hersey's novel, isn't that a further sign that attempts to establish links between World War Two and the imperial wars of today are simply untenable?

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