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# Poo-tee-weet? Unintelligent Things to Say About a Massacre: Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five and US interventions in the post-WWII era

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**Poo-tee-weet? Unintelligent Things to Say About a Massacre:  
Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* and US interventions in the  
post-WWII era**

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An undergraduate thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a  
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## **Introduction**

Kurt Vonnegut was liberated from the German prison in Dresden in 1945. His war novel portraying the events he witnessed, namely the firebombing of Dresden, was not published until 1969. Why did it take him so long to write this novel? What happened in the intervening years to direct the themes of the novel?

This paper seeks to answer these questions in an attempt to shed more light on the famous American author and the era following World War II. To understand the environment in which *Slaughterhouse Five* was developed, I will first explore the political climate following WWII. I will consider the use of analogies such as the Munich analogy in policymaking, both in private discussions between policymakers and in public forums where analogies were used to persuade the public. The Munich Syndrome was a political assumption that all aggression in the world should be treated like the aggression of Nazi Germany leading up to WWII. This assumption informed many of the foreign policy decisions following the war. The Munich Syndrome also assumed that US involvement in WWII was undeniably noble and that the Allied powers were solely a force for good. *Slaughterhouse Five* tells a more human story, one that focuses on the parts of WWII that no one wanted to discuss.

*Slaughterhouse Five* was a product of many factors in Vonnegut's life. First, I will explain how Vonnegut's experiences of war as a child, soldier and prisoner gave him a different perspective on war. Then, I will show how his experiences after the war greatly influenced the tenor of the novel. And finally, I will examine the themes of the novel and how they undermine the assumptions of the Munich Syndrome.

I chose to write about Vonnegut and the creation of *Slaughterhouse Five* because I believe this popular, anti-war book is so much more powerful when placed in its historical context. Vonnegut wrote an anti-WWII book at a time when American leaders were actually using WWII analogies to inform their foreign policy decisions. And Vonnegut's message about the struggle of veterans upon returning home has a much greater effect when his audience understands that Vonnegut himself endured that journey. The war took away twenty-four years of his life. Twenty-four years during which he struggled to cope with his experiences.

### **Section I: Political Environment**

1969 was the peak of US involvement in Vietnam: 543,000 American troops were stationed in the remote Southeast Asian country (Collier). *Slaughterhouse Five*, published in 1969, stands in direct opposition to the reasoning that led post-WWII policy makers to increase US involvement around the world, culminating with the war in Vietnam. Policy makers used lessons that they drew from WWII to justify intervention abroad; *Slaughterhouse Five* undermines these lessons and ultimately weakens the justifications for US involvement in Vietnam. To fully understand the development of *Slaughterhouse Five* it is necessary to examine the historical context in which it was developed and the decision-making process that Vonnegut undermines.

### **US Involvement After WWII**

After WWII the United States became increasingly involved around the world. In Great Britain's weakened state after the war, the formerly powerful empire could no

longer protect its interests abroad. Britain's waning influence worldwide combined with the growing threat of the Soviet Union and Communism spurred the US to take on more international responsibility. This process began in 1946 when the US confronted the U.S.S.R. after the Soviets refused to remove troops from Iran after WWII ended. Then in 1947 the United States decided to support right-wing governments in Greece and Turkey against communist rebels. 1948 was the first year that the United States' escalations abroad involved committing US troops to foreign soil, in this case, in order to break the blockade that the Soviet Union had set up around Berlin. The Korean War lasted from 1950 to 1953. American troops were stationed in Lebanon in 1958. The United States met with success in some of these situations and kept defeat at bay in others, like the Korean War. Policymakers were emboldened by the successes and ultimately led the US into the Vietnam War, which began in 1964 and lasted until 1973 (Collier).

The escalation of US involvement in these years and the transition to military action has been attributed to the lessons that policy makers took from WWII.<sup>1</sup> Peter Beinart calls it the "Hubris of Toughness," but the most common term for this relationship is the Munich Syndrome (Beinart). In *Prisoners of the Past? The Munich Syndrome and Makers of American Foreign Policy in the Cold War Era*, Göran Rystad explains the Munich Syndrome as comprised of three components: the Munich analogy, the Domino Principle, and the Aggression Theory (Rystad 25).

Policymakers have used the Munich analogy as proof that appeasement will inevitably lead to general war. International aggressions starting with the Japanese

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<sup>1</sup> See Göran Rystad *Prisoners of the Past?*, Peter Beinart *The Icarus Syndrome*, and Yuen Foong Khong *Analogies at War*.

invasion of Manchuria in 1931 were met with minimal response from global players who were still war weary from WWI. Benito Mussolini's Italy took Ethiopia in 1935. In 1936 Adolf Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland, a direct violation of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler then occupied Austria and set his sights on Czechoslovakia. This move finally got the attention of some of the major powers. France had a Treaty of Mutual Assistance with Czechoslovakia and French ties with the British also brought Great Britain into the picture (Khong 174-75).

The Munich Conference took place on September 30, 1938 between French Premier Edouard Daladier, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, Hitler, and Mussolini. The document signed at the conference agreed to the German annexation of the Sudeten part of Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain returned to England claiming that he had established peace. However, just six months later Hitler took the rest of Czechoslovakia and began making demands of Poland, ultimately leading the way to WWII (Khong 174-75).

After the war ended, American leaders were significantly impacted by the lessons of the Munich Conference: no aggression could go unchecked. Cordell Hull, Secretary of State from 1933 to 1944, adhered to this philosophy, claiming, "What happened in the thirties in China, Ethiopia, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland – all far removed from us geographically – was a cumulative series of steps that led unerringly to our involvement in the Second World War" (qtd. in Rystad 31). Similarly, in regard to communism, Republican Senator from 1928 to 1935, Arthur H. Vandenburg stated, "there is something of a 'parallel' in remembering what occurred prior to a similar cleavage between democracy and nazism, when we surely learned that we cannot escape

trouble by trying to run away from it and when ‘appeasement’ proved to be a fatal investment” (qtd. in Rystad 31).

A popular theme taken from the Munich Conference is known as the Aggression Theory. The Aggression Theory declares that totalitarian states are inherently aggressive and that aggressors will not stop their offensive actions without a countering force.

Chamberlain and Daladier hoped that giving Hitler the Sudetenland would stop his aggressive behavior, but Munich Syndrome adherents believe this only spurred Hitler’s aggression and encouraged him to take over even more territory. As President Lyndon Johnson said when discussing the Tonkin Gulf Affair, during the Vietnam War, “We have learned that aggression unchecked is aggression unleashed” (qtd. in Rystad 49).

This type of logic demonstrates why American leaders felt it was necessary to intervene in remote areas of the globe where communists demonstrated aggressive behavior. In each case US policymakers determined that any aggression was a direct threat to the United States because aggressors would not stop until they were compelled to.

The Domino Theory is the final component of the Munich Syndrome. The Domino Theory states that if one geographic region falls to communism, the surrounding areas will soon fall too. This was first used in the Near East Crisis. Dean Acheson, Secretary of State during the Truman Administration, used the Domino Theory to persuade Congress to assist Turkey and Greece: “Iran borders on Afghanistan and India... carries us to Burma, Indonesia, and Malaya, areas in French Indochina... and that carries you to China. And what we are trying to point out is that a failure in these key countries would echo through vast territory” (qtd. in Rystad 30). This kind of reasoning makes most countries of the world “key countries” and therefore makes most of the world



vital to US national security. The Domino Theory greatly expanded American concerns abroad.

These analogies were deeply imbedded in American political life; Vonnegut would have to work against them in order to show a darker side of WWII, a side where Allied actions could be called into question. These quotations from various influential American leaders show that they used the lessons of Munich to persuade the American people that intervention abroad was vital to US interests. However, some in-depth studies have shown that the use of analogies in policymaking actually has a significant impact on the kind of policy that is produced. Analogies serve a dual function of (1) getting the American public on board with significant policy changes, and (2) actually impacting the development of these policies. In the following sections I will explain and synthesize the literature on the affect of analogies on decision-making, then I will examine uses of analogies in public by looking at Harry Truman's speeches regarding Turkey and Greece and Korea.

### **The Effects of Analogies on Policymaking**

The similarities drawn between WWII and confrontations in other areas of the world is important because they have had a real impact on the makers of foreign policy. Rystad determines that the three components of the Munich Syndrome were "expressions of the basic assumptions dominating and determining the psychological world of most American decision makers in the Cold War Era" (Rystad 71). However in *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, Yuen Foong Khong takes this a step further and makes the substantial and compelling argument that

the components of the Munich Syndrome were not just the expression of assumptions but that they actually significantly affected the decisions made by policymakers. Whereas Rystad emphasizes how policy makers used analogies to justify and persuade, Khong argues that the psychological effects of analogies are enough to have influenced the policies during the Cold War.

Analogies help people interpret situations and produce solutions in six steps, according to Khong (Khong 21). The first three steps allow for interpretation. First, an analogy helps the analogy-maker to define the situation. Second, it provides the analogy-maker with a sense of what is at stake in the situation. Third, the analogy can suggest possible solutions to the problem. The final three steps allow the analogy-maker to evaluate the proposed solutions. Fourth, the analogy-maker can predict the likelihood of success using the analogy for guidance. Fifth, the analogy can help to evaluate the moral rightness of the proposed solutions. Finally, sixth, the analogy can provide a warning for the dangers associated with the solutions.

Khong's hypothesis is supported by psychological research that shows that schema and analogies are significant components of cognitive processes. Schema is more general than an analogy: "schema is a generic concept stored in memory" (Khong 26). Associating aggression with general war is a schema; it is a general belief or feeling that is associated with a certain concept. Comparing specific events such as the aggression of North Korea in 1950 to the aggression of Germany in 1938 is an analogy. Both are important types of knowledge structures that shape how a person perceives other stimuli. Khong determines that if it is true that these knowledge structures are crucial parts of information processing, "it follows that the analytical view's assumption that analogies

play an important information processing role in foreign policy decision-making is strongly vindicated” (Khong 28). Importantly, Khong also points out that schemas allow policy makers to fill in the blanks of information with the “default values” from the schema. Therefore, if policy makers ascribe to the Korea analogy when interpreting the situation in Vietnam, they may remember that North Korea was supported by the Soviet Union and China. If North Vietnam is displaying the same sort of characteristics that North Korea displayed than it follows, using schema, that North Vietnam is also supported by the Soviet Union and China. Then policy makers can determine that the successful maneuvers used in Korea can also be successful in Vietnam.

Schemas and analogies affect the way that people process information, making them biased towards certain reasoning: “They make possible and control the characterization of incoming data, the positing of causal relationships among variables, and the prediction of outcomes” (Khong 220). The cognitive functions of schemas and analogies provide an explanation for why some policies were accepted while others were rejected. To explain this process, Khong notes a psychological study conducted by Harold Kelley in which participants were split into groups and each group was given a seven-adjective description of a lecturer. Some groups received positive adjectives while other groups received negative adjectives. The study showed that those groups that received a positive description thought that the lecturer was warm and friendly. In contrast, the groups with the negative descriptions thought that the same lecturer was cold and self-centered. The conclusion was that “simple manipulation of expectations had a profound influence on the perception of the subjects” (Khong 38). An important point of this study was that information that did not fit the schema given to the participants was

ignored. In this way it is possible to understand how policy makers could assume information about Vietnam that was not founded in evidence but that fit with their schema. Vonnegut also shows the effects of schema on Americans in his novel. Pieces of the story that do not fit in with the noble image of WWII are largely ignored, like the broken veteran Billy Pilgrim and the Allied bombing of Dresden.

### **Use of Analogies in Policy Debates**

The frequent use of analogies in private discussions among American leaders lends credibility to the hypothesis that analogies serve a greater purpose than just persuading the public. Khong's research shows that analogies used in connection with Vietnam between 1950 and 1966 were almost just as frequently invoked in private as they were in public. In public, parallels were drawn between Vietnam and Korea, Vietnam and the 1930s, and Vietnam and Greece a total of 137 times (Khong 60. Table 3.1). The most common analogies used in private were Korea, the French experience in Vietnam, and Malaya, and these analogies were used a total of eighty-four times (Khong 61. Table 3.2). If analogies were only prevalent in public addresses then it might indicate they are used only to persuade or justify policy changes to the American people. The presence of analogies in private debates shows that policy makers used analogies to convince one another; therefore they must have believed in the lessons that the analogies produced.

The total number of the most frequent analogies used in public broken down by quarter between 1961 and 1966 shows that every major decision regarding Vietnam was accompanied by a spike in the use of analogies in private (Khong 98. Figure 5.1). Four

peaks can be discerned from the statistics. A spike in 1961 corresponds with President John F. Kennedy's decision to send advisors and aid to South Vietnam. The 1964 spike corresponds to President Lyndon B. Johnson's decision to begin an air war in Vietnam, and another spike in 1965 relates to Johnson's decision to begin a ground war. The final spike in the data shows the 1966 decision to bomb key spots in North Vietnam (Khong 98).

A transcript of a meeting with Johnson and other key policy makers demonstrates that analogies were used frequently and seriously when debating strategy in Vietnam. On July 21 and 22, Johnson held a meeting with many key leaders including Under Secretary of State George Ball, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and US ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge, among other. The meeting was called to discuss McNamara's recommendation that the United States commit a substantial number of troops to Vietnam, thus committing the United States to a large land war in Southeast Asia. In order to substantiate their claims, many of the policymakers used their chosen analogies to convince others at the meeting. George Ball urged caution and recommended withdrawing from Vietnam because he ascribed to the French experience analogy. Ball saw many similarities between the French involvement in Vietnam and the American involvement in Vietnam; therefore he did not believe that the US could reach any favorable outcome. In contrast, Johnson and McNamara invoked Korea to determine that the US could and should act significantly in Vietnam. On the second day, Johnson met with his military advisors. Paul Nitze, the secretary of the Navy, pointed to the

Philippines and Greece as evidence that guerilla forces can lose and so the guerilla forces in Vietnam could be beaten with the addition of more force (Khong 123-33).

Each analogy invoked at the two meeting was met with opposition and facts that were meant to disprove similarities that connected the situation in Vietnam to the French experience, Korea, and Greece and the Philippines. Only one analogy was met with no opposition. Henry Cabot Lodge told his colleagues, “I feel there is a greater threat to start World War III if we don’t go in. Can’t we see the similarity to our own indolence at Munich?” (qtd. in Khong 129). No one disagreed. Khong points out that the silence was due to the power of the analogy; everyone thought it was correct:

In their public speeches, their memoirs, or their writings, the Vietnam policymakers often made the point that Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler at Munich helped start World War II; for that reason, the United States could not allow Ho Chi Minh to take over South Vietnam, lest that lead to another world war. (Khong 134)

This also explains why the 1930s, Munich, analogy was used more frequently in public than in private, as discussed above. The 1930s analogy was not used in private as much because none of the policy makers needed to be convinced of its relevance. The Munich analogy was taken for granted: of course, aggression needed to be stopped or it would expand over the entire globe.

### **Escalation Justified by the Munich Syndrome: Public Use**

In examining the political environment that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was developed in, it is important to look at the public use of analogies because public explanations and

addresses are what Vonnegut would have been aware of. Analogies were used privately to develop policies, but they were also used publicly to convince Americans that major policy changes were necessary to ensure American national security.

US intervention following WWII started off slowly but gradually snowballed into massive, long-term intervention in Vietnam. The beginning of US intervention abroad was in 1946 with the Near East Crisis, involving Iran, Greece, and Turkey. This crisis marks the moment in history when “the lessons of the thirties were applied to new realities, to the emerging post-war confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union” (Rystad 25).

Great Britain struggled financially after the war. The once great empire had always kept Russian advances in check, but its ability to do so was quickly fading (Beinart 115). The Soviet Union stationed troops in Iran during the war and refused to withdraw them once the war was over until the USSR got a share of Persian oil. Although the Soviet Union was demanding oil, US policy makers inferred a more devious agenda. American diplomat Loy Henderson told the State Department that the Soviet Union was poised to invade Turkey straight through the Dardanelles into the Mediterranean and invade Iran through the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean (Rystad 26). Fear of an aggressive move by the Soviets propelled President Harry Truman into aggressive action. He demanded that the Soviet Union withdraw its forces and he sent \$10 million in military aid to Tehran (Beinart 115). These bold moves worked and the Soviets were gone within a year.

Britain’s exhaustion both spiritually and financially caused power vacuums in other areas of the globe as well. In 1947 a British embassy official informed the US State

Department that Great Britain would no longer protect Greece or Turkey. Turkey was being pressured by the Soviet Union; Moscow was demanding bases near the Dardanelles, which would greatly increase its power in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East (Beinart 115). In Greece, communist rebels were undermining the right-wing government.

These areas were traditionally under the influence of Great Britain, so American officials would be engaging in a major policy change if they agreed to take on responsibility for these geographic areas. Such a large extension of US foreign engagement would require a persuasive argument to get the American people on board. In 1947, Truman created parallels between World War II and the situations in Greece and Turkey to convince the American people of the necessity of getting involved; this is one of the first instances where the Munich Syndrome is evident.

Truman explained the situations in Greece and Turkey in a way that invoked World War II. His speech to Congress on March 12, 1947, which has become known as the “Truman Doctrine,” spells out his justifications for aiding the two far away countries (Truman “Truman Doctrine”).

Although Truman never mentions the Munich Conference of 1938, he does directly reference WWII and he invokes the Aggression and Domino Theories throughout his address. Within the first few moments of the speech, Truman reminds his audience of the destruction of WWII by describing the damage done to Greece by the Germans. Later on, he tells his audience that the primary objective of WWII is also the primary objective in Greece and Turkey; the battle has not been won yet: “One of the primary objectives of the foreign policy of the United States is the creation of conditions in which we and other



nations will be able to work out a way of life free from coercion. This was a fundamental issue in the war with Germany and Japan” (Truman “Truman Doctrine). Truman’s final mention of WWII comes at the end of the address when he directly asks for monetary assistance for Turkey and Greece. The assistance needed by these two countries was minuscule in comparison with the investment of \$341,000,000,000 put towards defeating the Axis Powers (Truman “Truman Doctrine”). Through using this comparison, Truman is asking Congress to see this small intervention as just a further extension of a project that has already been deemed worthy by the American people: keeping countries free from aggressors.

Although Munich is not directly referenced in the Truman Doctrine, the other two elements of the Munich Syndrome are present. The Aggression Theory makes its appearance first. Truman describes the situation in Greece by painting the rebels as “several thousand armed men, led by Communists,” and he accuses them of engaging in “terrorist activities” (Truman “Truman Doctrine”). The Truman Doctrine makes it clear that the United States is dedicated to stopping all aggression, with no geographic limits on this commitment: “We shall not realize our objectives, however, unless we are willing to help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes” (Truman “Truman Doctrine). In that statement lies the foundation for future interventions. It is clear that Truman is expanding US responsibility to protect any nation that appears to be the victim of an aggressive nation, any aggressive nation. So when North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950, Truman could not dismiss the aggressive move; he had already committed to help free peoples throughout the world maintain their free institutions.

The Domino Theory makes an equally strong appearance in this address. The right-wing Greek government was being threatened by rebel forces led by Communists. In comparison, Turkey seemed to have a weak case. Truman explained that Turkey required US assistance in pursuing a program of modernization that would be “necessary for the maintenance of its national integrity” (Truman “Truman Doctrine”). To make the issue more pressing, Truman followed up the description with this bold statement: “That integrity is essential to the preservation of order in the Middle East” (Truman “Truman Doctrine”). Now the situation is not just about Americans funding a far-away country’s infrastructure improvements; now it is about the balance of global power. A few paragraphs later, Truman explained exactly what he meant by that statement. If Greece fell under the control of the Communist rebels, it would have grave effects on its neighbor, Turkey. However, the effects did not stop with bordering neighbors because as Truman explained, “It is necessary only to glance at a map to realize that the survival and integrity of the Greek nation are of grave importance in a much wider situation” (Truman “Truman Doctrine”). Chaos would spread from Greece to Turkey and then throughout the entire Middle East. This in turn would have “a profound effect upon those countries in Europe” and ultimately the “Collapse of free institutions and loss of independence would be disastrous not only for them but for the world” (Truman “Truman Doctrine”).

Interestingly, it is also possible to see the effects of schema on the Truman Administration in this address. At one point he admitted that the Greek government has not always been correct in its actions. However, this should not be an argument against supporting Greece because even a bad democratic government is better than a communist one. Truman clearly associated a democratic government with positive values and

therefore could easily dismiss the shortcomings of the right-wing government. This demonstrates the point made earlier in this paper that schemas provide people with a way to interpret information and they also explain how contrary evidence can be dismissed.

On June 25, 1950 Truman learned that Communist North Korea had invaded South Korea (Beinart 119). To understand this act Truman once again looked to the past:

I had time to think aboard the plane. In my generation, this was not the first occasion when the strong had attacked the weak... I remembered how each time that the democracies failed to act it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead. Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier. (Rystad 35)

The Aggression Theory component of the Munich Syndrome is evident in his statement, Hitler could not be stopped by appeasement and North Korea would not stop either. The Munich analogy was at the forefront of Truman's mind: "My thoughts kept coming back to the 1930s – to Manchuria – Ethiopia – the Rhineland – Austria – and finally Munich. If the Republic of Korea was allowed to go under, some other country would be next, and then another just like in the 1930s" (Rystad 35). The powerful Domino Theory was not lost on Truman here either; if South Korea fell to communism other countries would soon follow.

Although the Truman Administration had stated that the containment strategy did not extend to mainland Asia, American troops were deployed to South Korea. Truman did not want to be accused of appeasement, and recent successes in Iran, Greece, and Turkey gave him confidence to extend US involvement to the Asian mainland. Within a few days of the invasion, Truman committed US air and naval support to South Korea.

About ten months after the United States became involved in Korea, Truman gave an address to the American people to discuss the situation in Korea. The April 10<sup>th</sup> address was much bolder than the speech Truman gave to Congress on Greece and Turkey. In the speech Truman used the words aggression and aggressor a total of fifteen times (Truman “Report to the American People on Korea”). He also spoke directly of a third world war six times. All three elements of the Munich Syndrome are present and are more prevalent than they were in the Truman Doctrine.

The Aggression Theory is evident throughout the entire speech. Truman described North Korea as an “aggressor,” and all of North Korea’s actions are “aggressive.” Truman stated, “If history has taught us anything, it is that aggression anywhere in the world is a threat to peace everywhere in the world” (Truman “Report to the American People on Korea”). If Khong is correct in his explanation of the effects of analogies on cognitive processes, then by comparing the situation in South Korea to Munich in 1938 Truman saw much higher stakes than there might have been in reality. At stake was peace everywhere in the world because Truman believed that peace everywhere was at risk during WWII. If Truman did not use the analogy of the 1930s, he may have only seen the aggression of North Korea as an issue pertaining to just Asia.

The Munich analogy is the undeniable foundation of Truman’s argument. He explained to his audience: if peace-loving nations “had followed the right policies in the 1930’s – if the free countries had acted together to crush the aggression of the dictators, and if they had acted in the beginning when the aggression was small – there probably would have been no World War II” (Truman “Report to the American People on Korea”). As discussed previously, when making decisions about Vietnam, Johnson’s advisors

often took the Munich analogy as given; no one challenged the assumption that if the members of the Munich Conference had confronted Hitler, then no war would have occurred. Here, it is clear that Truman had been emboldened to use the Munich analogy in such a way. The Munich analogy was not challenged in the Truman Doctrine, and successes in Greece, Turkey, and Iran confirmed its truth. Then in 1951, Truman used the analogy again, with even greater conviction. The myth of the Munich analogy grew at each of these historical moments until its power became so great that it could be invoked in a room of intelligent men holding the fate of a nation and not a single one would question its legitimacy.

The potential solutions put forth by Truman were entirely informed by the Munich analogy. He offered that the United States would negotiate, “but we will not engage in appeasement” (Truman “Report to the American People on Korea”). He then laid out steps for a negotiation; the third and most important step was an end to aggression. These steps are where Truman and his successors indicated their belief that the members of the Munich Conference went wrong; Daladier and Chamberlain did not do enough to ensure that the aggression would end, thus they paved the way for Hitler to continue his war.

The Domino Theory is employed in this address to exaggerate the importance of South Korea to American national security. Truman informed his audience: “The attack on Korea was part of a greater plan for conquering all of Asia” (Truman “Report to the American People on Korea”). The belief was that the Communists were going to unify all of Asia under a red flag in order to “crush the United States” (Truman “Report to the American People on Korea”).

The April 11 address lays the foundation for intervention in Vietnam by strengthening and adding to the same assumptions that the Truman Doctrine set forth. The aggression of North Korea could only be stopped with force. A small Asian country was vital to US national security because if the small country fell to communism, its neighbors would inevitably join. Both of these assumptions are supported by the Munich analogy, which went unquestioned in public, and, for the most part, in private too.

### **Conclusion**

The connections drawn between WWII and later interventions abroad provided credibility to the later interventions. WWII was America's noble war and, because of this, no one would argue with interventions that were judged to be equivalent in importance to WWII. By invoking the Munich Conference, policy makers raised the stakes in every other instance of aggression. Looking at the outcome of the Munich Conference, people could only reasonably come to the conclusion that not standing up to aggression would result in another world war.

Vonnegut's war novel, or more accurately his anti-war novel, chops away at the connections that policymakers used to justify their interventions; he undermines the assumptions of the Munich Syndrome. The focus on the firebombing of Dresden highlights the destructive power of war and the injustice that it causes. This is furthered by the fact that even though Dresden was an enemy city the destruction was not any less cruel and the civilian casualties were not any less tragic. If WWII was not a noble war then were the later interventions around the globe really justifiable?

## **Section II: Internal Factors**

In the previous section, I discussed the political culture centered on the Munich Syndrome that caused the growing presence of the United States world-wide following WWII. In the following sections I will describe the connections between this discussion and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969). As previously mentioned, Vonnegut was a prisoner of war in Dresden, Germany when the Allies firebombed Dresden. After Vonnegut was liberated and the war ended it took him twenty-four years to publish his war novel. I will show why Vonnegut became an anti-war author by discussing how his experiences with war at various stages of his life made him feel a repugnance toward it and how his post-war experiences shaped his perception of the war, ultimately determining how he wrote his war novel. Finally I will demonstrate how *Slaughterhouse Five* works to undermine the assumptions of the Munich Syndrome by discussing the pertinent themes of the novel.

### **Vonnegut's Experiences with War**

Vonnegut was forged into an anti-war author by his experiences with war in various roles. His first experience with the effects of war began at birth; he was born to German American parents in the post-WWI environment of anti-German sentiment. Then, in 1943, while WWII was continuing to escalate in Europe, Vonnegut left Cornell University to enlist in the United States Army; in 1944 he was shipped to Europe. Shortly after, he was captured by German forces and sent to work in a prison camp. While a prisoner, Vonnegut witnessed one of the most destructive events of WWII, the firebombing of Dresden, and its aftermath. As a child, a soldier, and a prisoner Vonnegut

experienced several aspects of war and found that the only common theme was destruction and suffering.

Born in 1922, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. came into the world during a period of distrust and anger directed at Germans. WWI had pitted Americans against Germans and caused discrimination and prejudice against German Americans from their fellow citizens. Kurt came from a family of well-known German ethnicity. Kurt's father, Kurt Vonnegut Sr., was a second-generation German American and, after graduating from finishing school in Philadelphia, Kurt's mother Edith Sophia Lieber spent time at her grandfather's castle in Dusseldorf (Shields 10). The Vonneguts and the Liebers both belonged to a social community of very wealthy German American families. The community centered on Das Deutsche Haus, the German cultural center in Indianapolis.

Although his parents spoke German and socialized with other German-Americans, Kurt Jr. admitted that he never learned much about the culture. He blamed this ignorance on his parents and the anti-German sentiments that arose from WWI. He said that his parents "volunteered to make me ignorant and rootless as proof of their patriotism" (qtd. in Shields 25). Kurt Sr. found a note in the family's mailbox one morning that threatened him if he did not stop teaching his children German. The Vonneguts were not the only German family that felt pressured to downplay their heritage: the Das Deutsche Haus was renamed the Athenaeum after a vandal threw yellow paint on it (Shields 25).

Culture is a casualty of war in Kurt Jr.'s experience. Even though he was not born until after the war, his upbringing was greatly affected by the prejudice that WWI caused against Germans. In his mind it was senseless; the Vonneguts were no threat to the



United States; in fact, eight Vonnegut men registered for the draft (Shields 25).

Vonnegut's biographer, Charles J. Shields notes that Vonnegut's family was more than likely not intimidated by the bigots and nativists that sought to threaten German-Americans. Kurt Sr. and Edith's choice to not teach Kurt Jr. German was probably not a consequence of the threats because they had not been teaching their older children German either. However, Vonnegut's statements and seemingly bitter attitude towards his involuntary cultural ignorance demonstrates that in his mind WWI severed the connection between him and his heritage.

During the start of WWII, Kurt was enrolled at Cornell University. He was there from 1940 to January 1943 when he dropped out to enlist in the army (Shields 48). In 1944 Vonnegut was shipped to Europe and his division was sent to western Germany. Vonnegut's division came under heavy assault on December 16, 1944, which ended in the surrender and capture of the 106<sup>th</sup> division (Shields 57). During the battle, one of Vonnegut's comrades was shot and left behind. The abandonment of the soldier by the rest of the division led Vonnegut to the realization that they were not heroes; they were just young men scared and doing everything they could to stay alive. Later on he recalled what it was like being a scout: "our whole purpose was to either step on mines or to draw fire. Nobody knows what's out there and we're so fucking smart we're going to find out" (qtd. in Shields 59). He clearly resented the role and felt used by the Army. The lack of concern for his safety, or for the safety of his fellow infantrymen like the one they left behind, haunted Vonnegut after the war.

The most disturbing parts of Vonnegut's biography are the descriptions of the prison camp and the lives of the prisoners of war. They were starved, forced to march

endlessly in the bitter cold, stuffed into boxcars without enough room to move, and that was all before they even got to the prison. Upon reaching the prison, an Australian prisoner who was part of the Royal Air Force Bomber Command watched the Americans' entrance. He recalled what the Americans endured: "stepping over the bodies of comrades who slumped to die in the snow, jolted for days in cattle-trucks and boxcars that were strafed and bombed by the Allied air-fighters, the Americans are macabre burlesques of men" (qtd. in Shields 61). Filing into the prison, the men were "so shocked by their experiences that many are little more than animals stumbling erect" (qtd. in Shields 61). Vonnegut and some of his fellow prisoners were not there long, however; they were moved to Dresden to work in a vitamin factory.

Fellow soldiers in the prison camp served as models for many of Vonnegut's characters in *Slaughterhouse Five*. One of the most resounding themes of the novel is that soldiers were not big, brave heroes but instead they were either at the end of childhood, scared and unprepared, or old and overburdened by the deprivation that came with being in war. Fellow prisoner Michael Palaia, was the inspiration for the character Edgar Derby who was executed for stealing a teapot in the ruins of Dresden. Palaia actually stole a jar of pickled string beans because as an older man he was less capable of withstanding the deprivation (Shields 75). He was executed the next day; Vonnegut helped dig his grave.

A private named Edward "Joe" Crone was the inspiration for the protagonist of *Slaughterhouse Five*, Billy Pilgrim. Crone was not cut out to be a soldier. He wanted to be an Episcopalian minister. He had a "childlike face framed by big ears" and was always swapping his precious rations for cigarettes (Shields 66). Convinced that he would not be allowed to starve, Crone continued to trade away his food until he eventually succumbed

to the “thousand yard stare,” which is when “the person sits down on the floor with his back to the wall, will not talk, will not eat, and just stares into the space in front of him” (Shields 77). Crone was buried in a white paper suit, described by Shields as “a kind of holy fool” (Shields 77).

On February 13, 1945 the air raid sirens sounded in Dresden. As a cultural center, somewhat separated from the war, Dresden was never thought to be in any danger; the citizens walked home barely hurried by the sirens (Shields 69). At 10:05 PM the first attack began; RAF crews dropped 1,400 tons of high-explosive bombs and 1,180 tons of incendiary bombs on Dresden (Shields 70). A second wave of bombers came three hours later. The number of people killed that night is a highly debated topic. Dresden had been inundated with refugees from the eastern front, so the range is said to be from 25,000 to 135,000 dead (“Firebombing of Dresden”). If the number does extend all the way to 135,000 victims, then the firebombing of Dresden was the single most destructive event of WWII, including the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It was the job of the American prisoners to try to clean up after the attack. Vonnegut was put in the group that was tasked with removing bodies from basement shelters where all of the oxygen was sucked out by the fiery tornados caused by the bombs dropped above. Vonnegut remembered that the basements “looked like a streetcar full of people who’d simultaneously had heart failure. Just people sitting there in their chairs, all dead” (qtd. in Shields 74). Down in the tombs the prisoners “fought off hysteria when limbs of corpses snapped off or yanking a gas mask hose pulled off a head” (Shields 75). Later on, Vonnegut would not describe such gruesome scenes in *Slaughterhouse Five*, but he had the smell of mustard gas and roses follow the

protagonist throughout his whole life; it was the smell of the bodies he excavated from the Dresden basements. Perhaps he never describes these scenes because they are too painful to remember. Compared to the soldier who remembered limbs and heads falling off of corpses, Vonnegut's anecdote about corpses looking like they died of heart failure in a streetcar is much more mild.

His experiences as a POW had a profound effect on Vonnegut and greatly influenced all of his writing after the war until the end of his life. A quote from Vonnegut's nephew Scott precedes the Shields' biography *And So It Goes* (2012). Scott tells about his uncle's laughter: "laughter that at times seemed inappropriate following the retelling of some of the most ghastly events of the twentieth century. This laughter was a mental bulwark against the madness of the war he witnessed." The horrors of war haunted Vonnegut throughout his life. In order to cope with them, he used his laughter and sarcasm to push away the memories of the shocking experiences.

On May 29, 1945, from a Red Cross Club in the Le Havre POW Repatriation Camp, Vonnegut was finally able to write to his family. The letter alludes to themes that would become the pillars of *Slaughterhouse Five*: the senseless destruction of war, the nonsensical and inevitable characteristics of death, and the misuse of soldiers by the government. He tells his family about the bombing of Dresden, calling it "possibly the world's most beautiful city" (Vonnegut, *Letters* 8). He tells them about the treatment they received as prisoners of war and the death of his comrades. He recalled how upon finally reaching the prison, nearly starved to death and frozen, they were put into scalding delousing showers, "Many men died from shock in the showers after ten days of starvation, thirst and exposure. But I didn't" (Vonnegut, *Letters* 7). He told them how

Dresden was destroyed and much of the population along with it, “But not me” (Vonnegut, *Letters* 8). The refrain “but not me” or “but I didn’t” in regard to death arises several times in the letter. It is echoed by the famous repeating line in *Slaughterhouse Five*: “so it goes.” Vonnegut accepts the randomness of death in this phrase: men died in the delousing showers, in the bombings of Dresden, in the bombings by the Russians on the Saxony-Czechoslovakian border. Vonnegut recognizes that he could have easily been one of those men.

Vonnegut’s famous sarcasm also shines through in his letter home. He tells his family that he will be sent back to the US soon and “once home I’ll be given twenty-one days recuperation at Atterbury, about \$600 back pay and – get this – sixty (60) days furlough!” (Vonnegut, *Letters* 9). After everything that he experienced, he is getting sixty days furlough as compensation. This issue is resurrected in *Slaughterhouse Five* when Billy Pilgrim is put in a hospital room with Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, a history professor who is working on a history of the US Army Air Corps in WWII. Despite writing about the bombing of Dresden, Rumfoord actively scorned and ignored the veteran lying in the next bed. While Rumfoord exalted the actions of the men who dropped bombs on the city, he insulted the man who actually endured the assault and witnessed the destruction firsthand (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* 184, *SH*). The encounter demonstrates the way Vonnegut believes people who champion war feel about the men who actually fight the war. The men who call the shots care about the numbers, not the actual physical, emotional, and mental toll that is paid by soldiers and veterans.

As a child Vonnegut learned that wars could cause prejudice and hate even between countrymen. At the age of twenty-one he learned that he was not a hero in war;

none of his fellow soldiers were: they just wanted to live. As a prisoner of war he learned that humans are capable of savagery towards their fellows, and that the savagery was not limited to the “enemy.” Vonnegut saw that even his own side was capable of unspeakable horrors as he pulled the bodies of women, children, and elderly out of basements where they huddled together and prayed for safety. Vonnegut saw from all different angles that there was nothing good or glamorous or heroic about war and so the seeds of *Slaughterhouse Five* were planted.

### **Vonnegut’s Post-War Experiences**

*Slaughterhouse Five* was published almost two and a half decades after the events described in the novel took place. Vonnegut struggled with his war book because he was so deeply affected by what he had witnessed that it was too painful for him to write about these memories. Four important post-WWII experiences helped Vonnegut to come to terms with his experiences and shaped the book that he would write.

After WWII, Vonnegut continued to pursue his passion, writing. Witnessing the destruction of Dresden gave him what every author dreams of: original and compelling material to write about. The problem was that nothing came to him. In the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five* the narrator, a fictionalized version of Vonnegut, describes the issue of writing about Dresden: “When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen” (SH 2). However, it was not as easy as he anticipated: “I think of how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been, and yet how tempting Dresden has been to write about...” (SH 2).

Between the end of WWII and the publication of *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut wrote to friends about the frustration he felt over his war book. On November 30, 1954 he wrote to his editor Harry Brague: “Look, old friend, as a psychological device, let’s pretend there isn’t ever going to be another book written by me” (*Letters* 60). Sounding exhausted at the end of the letter, Vonnegut confessed, “Honest to God – I don’t think there’s ever going to be another book, I can’t imagine where the time is going, and I get sick if I think about it too much” (*Letters* 60). A few months later Vonnegut wrote to his good friend Knox Burger: “Jesus – wouldn’t it be nice to write just one play a year, or just one anything? I’ve pretty well pooped out as a hack. The old Moxie is gone” (*Letters* 60-61). Over and over, Vonnegut expresses frustration with writing his Dresden book.

Some literary critics have explored the idea that writing *Slaughterhouse Five* actually served as a therapeutic process for Vonnegut to work through post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with which he was afflicted after witnessing the destruction of Dresden and undergoing life as a prisoner of war. Both Alberto Caciedo and Susanne Veas-Gulani diagnose Vonnegut with PTSD by first diagnosing Billy Pilgrim, then the narrator, and tying the work back to Vonnegut the man. Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut’s creation, expresses many symptoms of PTSD as listed by the Department of Veterans Affairs, including reliving the traumatic event; avoiding situations that remind the afflicted of the event; hyperarousal; feelings of hopelessness; depression or anxiety; and physical symptoms (“What is PTSD?”). The narrator, a fictionalized Vonnegut, similarly exhibits some of these symptoms including trouble sleeping, drinking problems, and relationship problems. The narrator tells the audience: “I have this disease late at night sometimes, involving alcohol and the telephone. I get drunk, and I drive my wife away

with a breath like mustard gas and roses” (*SH* 4). In this small confession the narrator exhibits four symptoms of PTSD: he drinks too much, he has trouble sleeping, he cannot connect with his wife, and he is living in two moments of time by noticing the smell of mustard gas and roses which is a smell that reminds him of the dead bodies in Dresden.

According to Vees-Gulani, Vonnegut’s inability to write about Dresden is “evidence of the long-term consequences of his witnessing those events” (Vees-Gulani 175). Vees-Gulani also makes the argument that Vonnegut wrote a story about someone else because writing his own story was too difficult. As discussed in the previous section, Billy Pilgrim is based on a man who was a prisoner of war with Vonnegut, Edward “Joe” Crone. Billy is pieced together from Crone and Vonnegut because a story based on Crone would have ended in Germany where Crone starved to death. However, Billy’s story does not end there. Instead he lives on to witness the same events that Vonnegut witnessed. Vees-Gulani believes that the mixture of autobiography and fiction “simultaneously binds Vonnegut to and distances him from the text and its implications” (Vees-Gulani 180). Writing *Slaughterhouse Five* took Vonnegut so long because it had to be the right book, with the right character and the right plot in order for Vonnegut to be able to face his trauma without being overwhelmed by it. It took four significant experiences to give Vonnegut the perspective he needed to face his memories and create *Slaughterhouse Five*.

Possibly the most significant impact on *Slaughterhouse Five* came from Mary O’Hare, the wife of Vonnegut’s war buddy Bernard O’Hare, who was also a prisoner of war in Dresden. In 1965, Vonnegut went to visit Bernard hoping that together they could recollect old war stories that would help Vonnegut write his book. Vonnegut noticed that



Bernard's wife was only barely masking her hostility towards him. The first chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five* recounts the run-in: "Then she turned to me, let me see how angry she was, and that the anger was for me. She had been talking to herself, so what she said was a fragment of a much larger conversation. "You were just *babies* then!" she said" (SH 14). She accused the narrator of writing a book that will glamorize war when in reality he and her husband were just children at the time: "You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men" (SH 14). This event is also described in the Shields' biography; Shields uses the excerpt from *Slaughterhouse Five* to describe part of the encounter so the conversation with Mary O'Hare that occurred with the narrator in *Slaughterhouse Five* also occurred with Vonnegut the author.

Mary's accusations made Vonnegut think. He agreed with her that they were barely at the end of childhood when they were sent to war. Then he had his epiphany: "It was war that made her so angry. She didn't want her babies or anybody else's babies killed in wars. And she thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies" (SH 15). So he promised Mary that if the book were ever actually finished he would include the phrase "The Children's Crusade" in the title, which is indeed the subtitle of *Slaughterhouse Five*. That conversation gave Vonnegut the lens he needed to tell his Dresden story. Writing a story about the children's crusade meant that *Slaughterhouse Five* would be a blatantly anti-war book, critical of the horrors of WWII, and focused on the human cost.

Writing about the children's crusade also offered Vonnegut a lens that put distance between himself and the events he would write about. The book would be for

Mary and mothers everywhere who wanted to protect their children from the horrors of war. This allowed Vonnegut to review the traumatic events he experienced from a different angle, perhaps one that was less destructive psychologically. Two decades after *Slaughterhouse Five* was published, Vonnegut wrote to fellow author Jerome Klinkowitz who had written an analysis of the book. Vonnegut told Klinkowitz, “I have to admit, after reading about all I managed to put into *Slaughterhouse-5*, that I really was flying by the seat of my pants and was lucky as hell. The biggest break, I think, was Mary O’Hare” (*Letters* 338).

Mary gave Vonnegut his lens and a run-in with a Hollywood agent reinforced the idea. In 1966, Vonnegut was still working on his war book. He went to California to visit friends and while he was there he met with Evarts Ziegler, a well-respected Hollywood agent. Ziegler offered Vonnegut a piece of advice on writing for movies: “create a strong central character that a famous actor will demand to play” (*Letters* 125). Vonnegut gave this a try when he got back home. He wrote a part for Kirk Douglas, which directly conflicted with what he promised Mary. However the character seemed out of place: Vonnegut explained, “I crossed him out again, because the war I saw wasn’t really that way” (*Letters* 125). He could not write an anti-war book titled “The Children’s Crusade” and also create a role for a hero. Through this experience Vonnegut realized that he would have to stick to the truth. Not only does *Slaughterhouse Five* have no place for a hero, but the spotlight is reserved for an anti-hero; no famous actors would be clamoring to play the role of Billy Pilgrim. After this attempt to create a hero and the discovery that it would be the wrong story, Vonnegut ceased to complain about writer’s block. The

collection of his letters shows many complaints leading up to this event, but none after. He had his protagonist and he was ready to write his war book.

In 1967, still two years away from finishing *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut took a trip to Europe with Bernard O'Hare. The trip would take them through East Berlin, Dresden, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw, and Leningrad. The trip back to Dresden, where he had witnessed and experienced so much destruction and devastation, impacted Vonnegut's work significantly. He went back to resurrect old memories only to find that nothing was as he remembered it. O'Hare and Vonnegut found a friendly, English-speaking taxi driver who would take them to the slaughterhouse where they took shelter from the bombs that fell twenty-two years earlier. However, as they drove to the spot where it had stood, the veterans saw nothing but open space filled with grass and weeds. The whole city was different; the spires and rooftops that had once decorated the skyline were gone. After his trip, Vonnegut wrote to his editor, Sam Lawrence, and confessed the disappointment he felt: "I will tell you about Berlin and Dresden and Vienna and Salzburg and Hamburg and Helsinki and Leningrad, if you really want to hear about them. But you would be out of your head to ask" (*Letters* 138). He told Sam, "Dresden, 'The Florence of the Elbe,' is now more like Cedar Rapids in 1936" (*Letters* 138). When Vonnegut was liberated in 1945, he wrote home to his family and told them that Dresden was "possibly the world's most beautiful city," but almost two decades after its destruction the once beautiful cultural center looked more like a small town in Iowa during the Great Depression (*Letters* 8).

Vonnegut's biographer, Charles J. Shields, best explains the impact that this trip had on Vonnegut's writing. Shields suggests that although the destinations of the trip

were disappointments, the trip still gave Vonnegut a fresh way to approach his book. Shields attributes this to the books that Vonnegut took with him on the trip, *The Waking* by Theodore Roethke and *Céline and His Vision* by Erika Ostrovsky. In the context of the trip these two works led Vonnegut “to several realizations about the effect of time on making sense of experience” (Shields 230). The following lines from a Roethke poem affected him deeply:

I wake to sleep, and take my sleeping slow.

I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.

I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know? (qtd. Shields 230)

After seeing that the Dresden that existed was so far removed from the Dresden he experienced, Vonnegut was freed from the constraints of what was truly there. He said later on about writing *Slaughterhouse Five*, “I need not show the bombing of Dresden” (qtd. in Shields 231). Instead Vonnegut would show the experience: what he felt rather than what he knew.

By whipping Billy Pilgrim back and forth through time and showing him struggling to get his bearings in his chaotic life, Vonnegut told his audience more about the experience of being in the war than just the cold and lifeless facts of how many people died and how many bombs were dropped. Shields explains: “For Vonnegut to describe his feelings of shock and confusion as a young army private – feelings that later took shape as nightmares – the truth was useless.... What he needed to communicate was the delirium created by his sense of chaos. And he could do it by playing havoc with

time...” (Shields 232). Playing havoc with time was a characteristic that he adopted from Céline’s writings after being reminded of his work in Erika Ostrovsky’s book. Vonnegut particularly admired the way Céline used language to make the reader feel a certain way: “Céline spat words on the page, hurled images at the reader giving the sensation of events happening frantically, out of context” (Shields 231). Likewise, Vonnegut pulls his readers away from the comfort of conventional novels and context and brings them along on the chaotic trip back and forth through time with Billy: “Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren’t necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next” (*SH* 23). The trip to Europe gave Vonnegut the style he would use to show the journey of Billy Pilgrim.

Vonnegut tried for decades to get his stories published in magazines. Time after time he was rejected. The problem was that “Americans were living in a Cold War “age of anxiety,” and he wanted to address contemporary issues...” (Shields 121). Erin Mercer addresses this problem of post-War literature in *Repression and Realism in Post-War American Literature* (2011). Mercer argues that Americans suppressed the horrors of WWII: the Holocaust, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the destruction of modern warfare. This repression is evidenced by the literature that was produced in this era, none of which addressed these horrors. Mercer suggests: “If the only evidence was the fiction produced in America during the first decade following 1945, one would get the impression that the horrors of World War II had never even happened” (Mercer 1-2).

In 1961 Vonnegut wrote a letter to the founder of *MAD* magazine pitching an idea for a short story about fallout shelters. In Vonnegut's story people could take one of two courses of action to protect themselves from atomic bombs: they could build shelters or they could buy kits that would help them take over other people's shelters (*Letters* 86). His edgy ideas were often read by editors but never actually picked up; they would just be returned with comments. This falls within the pattern of repression that Mercer suggests: ideas like Vonnegut's fall-out-shelter story would force Americans to acknowledge unpleasant ideas that they were not ready to address.

Struggling to make money for his growing family, Vonnegut wrote a frustrated, sarcastic letter to Burger complaining about magazine editors who neglected to see the value in his work: "Don't touch any of the atom-bombed buildings, Angel – you'll get your lily-white hands dirty on the charcoal" and "Why, who's that scrambling over the rubble toward us but Jacob Malik, wearing a zoot-suit, chewing gum, playing with a yo-yo, and rooting for the Dodgers. Have some of mom's apple pie, Jake" (*Letters* 43). Yakov Alexandrovich Malik was a Soviet diplomat at the time and Vonnegut's comments show his frustration with Americans' inability to address the real issues that faced the country; rather Americans would choose to see an Americanized version of an adversary such as Malik. The Cold War was picking up and the arms race was advancing to dangerous levels, but Americans just wanted to buy their new televisions and cars. As Mercer points out, much of the post-war literature actually focused on the banality of suburban life instead of dealing with the wounds of WWII. Vonnegut wanted to address the elephant in the room, but mainstream magazine editors were not ready to look.

After World War II, Americans were not ready for Vonnegut's stories about doom and man-made death. However, as the war in Vietnam dragged on, more people began to openly protest the war and cry out against the atrocities being committed. 1969, the year *Slaughterhouse Five* was published, was the height of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In 1968, news of the Tet Offensive shocked the nation as it showed how poorly the US was faring in Vietnam while politicians continued to lie that America and the South Vietnamese were winning. Revelations about the My Lai Massacre and the saturation bombings of Laos and Cambodia in 1969 added to American outrage over the Vietnam War. The environment of protest that surrounded Vietnam was the best environment for Vonnegut's anti-war book to get traction and take off. The country was finally ready to hear his story.

The final important experience that shaped *Slaughterhouse Five* was the connections Vonnegut drew between his own experiences in war and his son's request to be classified as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War. On November 28, 1967, Vonnegut wrote a letter to Draft Board #1 in Hyannis, Massachusetts. He staunchly supported his son's decision to refuse to fight in Vietnam: "It is in keeping with the way I have raised him. All his life he has learned hatred for killing from me" (*Letters* 140). Mary O'Hare reminded Vonnegut that wars are cyclical in nature: a war is fought and the men who fought in that war tell stories about all the brave parts and the children who hear those stories grow up to create their own wars to live their own heroic moments. Vonnegut includes this theme in *Slaughterhouse Five*; he shows how wars are passed down from father to son. *Slaughterhouse Five* works to break this cycle and so does Vonnegut's letter to the draft board. He explains to the draft board that his father gave

him guns when he passed away, “but they are covered with rust” (*Letters* 140). He tells the board that he is a WWII veteran: “I was an infantry scout, saw plenty of action, was finally captured and served about six months as a prisoner of war in Germany. I have a Purple Heart. I was honorably discharged. I am entitled, it seems to me, to pass on to my son my opinion of killing” (*Letters* 140). Vonnegut took part in the cycle – he inherited his father’s guns, he took part in WWII – but he will not pass the love of war onto his sons.

The sentiments stated in the letter to the draft board arise throughout *Slaughterhouse Five*. In the first chapter, the narrator explains what he taught his sons about war: “I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of the massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee. I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery...” (*SH* 19). To end the novel Vonnegut returns to the cycle: “My father died many years ago now – of natural causes. So it goes. He was a sweet man. He was a gun nut, too. He left me his guns. They rust” (*SH* 210). The narrator allows the guns to rust because he will not perpetuate the idea of glamorous wars. He refuses to send his sons to war after his experiences in Germany.

For two decades the idea of writing about Dresden weighed on Vonnegut’s mind. He thought it was his duty to share his experiences, but every outline he wrote was promptly discarded. Mary O’Hare helped him realize that his book would protest war; he did not want to be the kind of author that perpetuated glamorous stereotypes. The Hollywood agent reinforced this theme by challenging Vonnegut to create a hero. Once Vonnegut realized that a hero had no place in his story, he was able to focus on his sad,



anti-hero Billy. The trip to Europe helped Vonnegut develop the frantic style of writing that gives the audience an idea of the kind of chaos that surrounds war. Finally, writing a letter in support of his son's objection to the Vietnam War allowed Vonnegut to connect the two wars that, although separate in time, still followed the same themes of death and destruction.

### **Themes of *Slaughterhouse Five***

In an era of policymakers afflicted by the Munich Syndrome, what kind of book did Vonnegut produce? And, how did that book speak to so many people, quickly rising to the *New York Times* bestseller list where it remained for sixteen weeks? In the previous section I discussed how writing *Slaughterhouse Five* affected Vonnegut, but as Veegulani points out, publishing the novel forced it into the public arena: "the stories of Billy, the narrator, and consequently Vonnegut take on a public dimension. They draw attention to something that we often prefer to suppress and deny although it is important to remember, namely the crippling nature of war and the terrible toll that modern warfare extracts from those forced to live through it" (182). Perhaps *Slaughterhouse Five* was so popular because it was giving Americans something they desperately craved: the truth. Mercer's post-WWII literature review reveals that Americans sought to deal with the atrocities of the war by ignoring them. *Slaughterhouse Five* gave readers something that no other WWII books had: a real look at what soldiers endured during the war. The timing was ripe for Vonnegut; the height of the Vietnam War was sparking protests throughout the nation. Leaders and policymakers pointed to WWII as justification for intervening and staying in Vietnam, but *Slaughterhouse Five* dispelled the myth of the

noble war by revealing the truth, thus giving Vietnam protestors more ammunition to fight against the war in Southeast Asia.

The truths that Vonnegut revealed correspond with the major themes of the novel. The first is that the reality of war is vastly different than the perception of war back home. Secondly, policymakers and the American people refused to acknowledge the effects of war on veterans, namely, PTSD. And finally, war begets war and the cycle must be broken.

One of the ways that political and military leaders can hide the real consequences of war is by severing the connection between reality and perception back home. Vonnegut shows what war was really like. One startling realization that Vonnegut brings to light is that wars are fought by regular men, not G.I. Joe. Billy is obviously Vonnegut's clearest example of this issue. Billy is described as "preposterous – six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches" and most importantly, "he didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked liked a filthy flamingo" (*SH* 82-83). Here Vonnegut is asking his audience to think about what a "soldier" looks like. Most people probably picture a tall, broad man with five o'clock shadow across a strong jaw line. In reality, not all soldiers are like that. Some are like Billy, "powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends" (*SH* 30). As I explained in the previous section, Billy Pilgrim is an anti-hero. Vonnegut felt like there was no place for a hero in his story about WWII. By not including a hero, Vonnegut removed some of the glamor that surrounds war.

Billy is not the only example of what real soldiers were like. The character of Billy is modeled after a man that Vonnegut knew in the war: Edward Crone seemed

completely unequipped for war and unwilling to accept the reality of his situation. However, the many other examples of soldiers show that Crone was not the exception. Upon arrival at the prison camp all of the American prisoners were made to strip. A German guard looked at Billy and “asked a companion what sort of an army would send a weakling like that to the front. They looked at the other American bodies now, pointed out a lot more that were nearly as bad as Billy’s” (*SH* 83). In an exchange with a Dresden woman, three American soldiers admit that they are not equipped to handle war: one says he is too young, a second says he is too old, and Billy Pilgrim says he is not sure what he is. In response to the Americans, “‘All the real soldiers are dead,’ she said. It was true. So it goes” (*SH* 159).

The only “real” soldiers who fit the glamorized image are the Englishmen that are also held as prisoners of war in Germany. The English soldiers were some of the first English-speaking prisoners to be captured in the war, so they were part of the group of mature men who volunteered to fight. In contrast to these men stood the young boys and old men who had to be sent into the war when the first group was not enough. These English soldiers were well-fed because of a mistake in a Red Cross order for supplies that gave them five hundred parcels of food instead of fifty. They lifted weights, maintained their hygiene, and sang together. The Englishmen “made war look stylish and reasonable, and fun” (*SH* 94). However, they only portrayed that appearance because they were not actually part of the war. They were prisoners for four years and well taken care of. The Englishmen had forgotten what the war was really like. After the Americans had time to clean themselves and shave, the English colonel said to the oldest American prisoner, “You know – we’ve had to imagine the war here, and we have imagined that it was being

fought by aging men like ourselves. We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a shock. ‘My God, my God –’ I said to myself, ‘It’s the Children’s Crusade’” (*SH* 106).

Even on the opposing side, the soldiers were ill prepared, creating a connection between people and defying the boundaries of nations. Of the five soldiers who capture Billy, two are in their early teens and “two were ramshackle old men – droolers as toothless as carp. They were irregulars, armed and clothed fragmentarily with junk taken from real soldiers who were newly dead” (*SH* 52). Even the German’s commander, who resembled more closely the image of the hardened soldier, is done with the war: “he was a very good soldier – about to quit, about to find somebody to surrender to” (*SH* 53). The “real” soldiers, who are not dead yet, are sick of war. Even the “real” soldiers just want it to end.

Refusing to acknowledge the atrocities of the war meant that Americans and American leaders refused to acknowledge the damaging effects that the war experiences had on veterans. In the previous section, I explained how Vees-Gulani diagnosed Vonnegut with PTSD by diagnosing Billy Pilgrim. Billy shows many of the classic signs of PTSD: he relives his experiences, he is in a constant state of hyperarousal, he weeps uncontrollably, he cannot sleep, and he never talks about what he saw. By depicting Billy’s affliction, Vonnegut tells his audience the story of a broken veteran struggling to come to terms with what he lived through.

Billy is constantly reminded of the war in everything he does. Patterns of colors resurface throughout the novel, which connect Billy to the war. When Billy is first captured and taken to Germany, he is marched into a prison camp and past piles of

corpses “with bare feet that were blue and ivory” (*SH* 65). The train in which the prisoners of war were transported was marked with orange and black stripes to indicate that it was not a fair target for airplanes. Once Billy is home safe, he still sees these colors. The night of his daughter’s wedding he looks out at the tent where the wedding had taken place: “a gaily striped tent in Billy’s backyard. The stripes were orange and black” (*SH* 72). He cannot sleep so he sneaks out of bed: “He looked down at his bare feet. They were ivory and blue” (*SH* 72). Sitting safely behind his desk in Ilium, New York, Billy is startled every day by the same siren that announces high noon: “He was expecting World War Three at any time” (*SH* 57).

Billy lives in two presents, often re-experiencing moments from the war. The narrator tells the audience that Billy is “unstuck in time” and moves unwillingly throughout the moments of his life. He is behind enemy lines in Germany with broken civilian shoes, no helmet, no coat, and no weapon when he first comes unstuck in time. He is tired from days of travelling through the snow and avoiding German soldiers who were searching through the woods to find any survivors: “This was when Billy first came unstuck in time. His attention began to swing grandly through the full arc of his life, passing into death, which was violet light” (*SH* 43). This time travel is an escape mechanism while Billy is in the war. Soon after the Germans capture Billy, he time travels again to his office in Ilium. The causal effects of the time travelling are different in these two cases. The first time Billy comes unstuck in time it is to escape his present of dying in the woods and he is shaken out of it by another soldier. The second time, Billy’s true present is being in his office and he is reliving his capture in the war, which is clear

because his patient is waking him up from his time travelling. The second time is a flashback, common in people afflicted with PTSD.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, one of the four major symptoms of PTSD is “negative changes in beliefs and feelings.” This characteristic holds true for Billy as he adopts the Tralfamadorian view of life. Billy writes in a letter to the *Ilium News Leader*: “The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral” (*SH* 26-27). In this letter the origin of the famously repeated line is revealed: “Now when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is ‘So it goes’” (*SH* 27). For a man who witnessed so much death, it is much easier for Billy to believe that people are still alive in other moments of their lives and that death is just a temporary state. The dismissal of death in the phrase “so it goes” shows Billy’s apathy, a common symptom of PTSD. He shows apathy towards death and towards all negative events in life. He says that the Tralfamadorians told him in regards to their wars, “There isn’t anything we can do about them, so we simply don’t look at them. We ignore them” (*SH* 117). Similarly, Billy avoids talking about his experiences in the war with anyone, including his wife.

The climax of Billy’s affliction comes during the celebration for his eighteenth wedding anniversary. At the party, a barbershop quartet sings and Billy’s “mouthed filled with the taste of lemonade, and his face became grotesque, as though he really were being stretched on the torture engine called the *rack*” (*SH* 173). Unlike when Billy experiences flashbacks, he cannot figure out the connection between this barbershop

quartet and his physical revulsion: “Here was proof that he had a great big secret somewhere inside, and he could not imagine what it was” (*SH* 173). This scene shows the depth of Billy’s repression: even he cannot figure out why he had such a strong reaction. This experience is different than any other flashback Billy has in the book. He usually maintains a normal appearance, but this experience was enough to break his regular façade. It happens again when the quartet starts up another song and Billy leaves the party to think about what happened: “Billy thought hard about the effect the quartet had had on him, and then found an association with an experience he had had long ago. He did not travel in time to the experience. He remembered it shimmeringly” (*SH* 177).

The experience that Billy recounts is the closest that Billy’s memory and the novel ever get to the bombing of Dresden. He remembers being in the meat locker of the slaughterhouse while Dresden was being destroyed above. After it was safe to resurface, the prisoners and their four guards saw that the beautiful city looked more like the surface of the moon and that everybody in that beautiful city was meant to be dead. The four German guards “drew together instinctively, rolled their eyes. They experimented with one expression and then another, said nothing, though their mouths were often open. They looked like a silent film of a barbershop quartet” (*SH* 178). For Billy Pilgrim and for Kurt Vonnegut, the memory of the firebombing of Dresden is too traumatic to face head on. Instead, this memory is the only glimmer of the bombing that the reader ever gets. The hole in the story is obvious. In regards to the omission Vonnegut said, “there was a complete forgetting of what it was like... the center had been pulled right out of the story” (qtd. in Cacicedo 360).

Vees-Gulani explains that PTSD is not only caused by the traumatic events themselves but also by an atmosphere in society that hinders the processing of coping with the stressful situations. Mercer's description of post-war literature clearly shows the kind of atmosphere that veterans were returning home to: a society in denial. When the narrator describes the processes of writing the novel, he tells the reader that he reached out to the Air Force asking for details about the bombing of Dresden. He was told that he could not have access to that information because it was still top secret; "Secret? My God – from *whom?*" (SH 11). A whole city was leveled, along with most of its inhabitants, and the U.S. Air Force wanted to call it a secret.

Even in the veterans' hospital, doctors search for any cause of ailments other than the war. Billy voluntarily goes to the hospital because he believes he is going crazy: he is struggling to cope with his surroundings and to reconcile his current life with his traumatic experiences from the war. However, the doctors "didn't think it had anything to do with the war. They were sure Billy was going to pieces because his father had thrown him into the deep end of the Y.M.C.A. swimming pool when he was a little boy, and had then taken him to the rim of the Grand Canyon" (SH 100). Billy and his roommate in the hospital, Eliot Rosewater, lament their loss of interest in living. They both find that the regular way of coping with issues is not enough for the horrors they witnessed. Rosewater tells a psychiatrist at the hospital, "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (SH 101).

The old lies that Rosewater finds inadequate are the Judeo-Christian teachings. The old religious lessons do not explain the things that the veterans saw so they need



something new. They look to science fiction because “they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe” (*SH* 101). In keeping with the theme of religion as a method of coping, Billy becomes something of a prophet for the Tralfamadorian way of thinking. In a lecture to his followers one day, Billy tells them he will soon die and reminds them not to be sad because death is only one moment in a whole lifetime of moments; it is reminiscent of Christ’s last supper with the apostles. Cacicedo believes that “Billy must be seen as a spiritual pilgrim who follows in the footsteps of Christ” (365). I believe that Billy diverges from the teachings of Christ and is a spiritual pilgrim in search of a new mythology to help him cope. Rather than focusing on an afterlife, Billy chooses to believe that life on earth never really ends and that people can choose to only look at the pleasant moments and ignore the bad ones.

Later on, a plane on which Billy is a passenger crashes in Vermont and he ends up in another hospital. He shares a room with Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, a Harvard history professor. Rumfoord represents the proponents of war with power and wealth who refuse to acknowledge the human cost. While in the hospital, Rumfoord is working on a book about the Army Air Corps in WWII. Billy, a witness to the bombing of Dresden, a topic that Rumfoord is including in his book, is sitting one bed over and Rumfoord expresses nothing but disinterest and disgust towards Billy. Sure that Billy could no longer hear or think, Rumfoord says to his wife, “Why don’t they let him die? ... That’s not a human being anymore... Look at him! That’s life according to the medical profession. Isn’t life wonderful?” (*SH* 190). The irony is that the war that Rumfoord exalts is what made Billy the way he is. Even when Billy attempts to talk to Rumfoord about Dresden, Rumfoord dismisses him as just having echolalia: “Rumfoord

was thinking in a military manner: that an inconvenient person, one whose death he wished for very much, for practical reasons, was suffering from a repulsive disease” (*SH* 192).

The theme of ordinary soldiers as inconsequential to the policymakers reaches its climax with the exchange between Rumfoord and Billy. The sick veteran struggles to be heard: “there in the hospital, Billy was having an adventure very common among people without power in time of war: He was trying to prove to a willfully deaf and blind enemy that he was interesting to hear and see” (*SH* 193). The narrator even explains that there are almost no dramatic characters in this story or dramatic confrontations “because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces” (*SH* 164). Rumfoord causes Billy and the reader much frustration; if he would only listen to those like Billy, the “sick” and “listless” from the war, then he would have a better understanding of the Dresden air raid.

The final and perhaps most significant theme that Vonnegut created to reveal the truth about WWII is that war begets more war. In dismantling the myth of a glamorous or noble war Vonnegut seeks to prevent future wars from being justified. There are many images of violence being passed down from father to son throughout *Slaughterhouse Five*. Roland Weary tells Billy that his father had a large collection of guns, swords, and torture instruments. Throughout their time together Weary seems obsessed with torture and violence: he tells Billy “about neat tortures he’d read about or seen in the movies or heard on the radio – about other neat tortures he himself had invented” (*SH* 36).

Vonnegut is revealing that love of violence is taught and enforced through popular media as well as passed down generationally. This is similar to the message conveyed through

Mary O'Hare when she expressed concern that Vonnegut's novel would make war seem glamorous and so everyone would want to have another and her children would have to fight.

Even Billy's religious upbringing points him in the direction of violence. As a child he "had an extremely gruesome crucifix hanging on the wall of his little bedroom in Ilium. A military surgeon would have admired the clinical fidelity of the artist's rendition of all Christ's wounds – the spear wound, the thorn wounds, the holes that were made by the iron spikes. Billy's Christ died horribly" (SH 38). Not a biological father but rather the spiritual Father is passing on violence to his children. Perhaps this is why Billy and Elliot Rosewater feel that the Judeo-Christian teachings are not enough to compel them to live: they already saw too much violence.

The enormity and power of the cycle of violence is clearly conveyed in *Slaughterhouse Five*. When the narrator tells someone that he is writing an anti-war book, the man replies, "Why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?" (SH 3). Even the narrator admits, "What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too" (SH 3). When the Tralfamadorians talk to Billy about their wars, they resign themselves to the belief that the wars cannot be stopped so it is better to just ignore those times altogether. The Tralfamadorians cannot do anything to stop their wars because they have no free will, and they inform Billy that free will is only an illusion of Earthlings. Instead, the Tralfamadorians say, and Billy comes to believe, "All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is*. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all... bugs in amber" (SH 86).

Although the cycle seems unstoppable, Vonnegut is not discouraged. If Vonnegut truly believed that writing an anti-war book was equivalent to writing an anti-glacier book, he would not have written *Slaughterhouse Five*. Instead of accepting wars as a given in human existence, he takes steps to end the cycle. In the first chapter, the narrator, the fictionalized Vonnegut, tells the reader that he taught his sons that they are not to take part in any massacres, to work for companies to make massacre machinery, or to take joy from the massacre of enemies. He supports his son's refusal to serve in Vietnam. He does not pass violence on to his sons and he refuses to accept violence from his father: he lets the guns he inherited rust.

Even in describing the Tralfamadorian view of the world Vonnegut shows disgust for so much passivity. A Tralfamadorian casually explains to Billy that it is their fault the universe will end when a Tralfamadorian pilot experimenting with fuels presses a button and the whole universe disappears and they have no intention of stopping it: "He has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way" (SH 117). Even Billy initially responds to this with a confused, "Um." Vonnegut does not want the reader to accept war or violence as passively as the Tralfamadorians. To close the novel Vonnegut includes imagery that leads the reader out of a painful tale of a veteran's struggle up to the light. When the prisoners of Dresden are released and the war is over, it is springtime and "the trees were leafing out" and "Birds were talking" (SH 215).

*Slaughterhouse Five* broke two decades of silence surrounding WWII. Vonnegut created strong themes that worked against the assumptions that led policymakers into

Vietnam, namely, that WWII was undeniably noble and nothing bad came of it because the United States was fighting pure evil.

## **Conclusion**

With *Slaughterhouse Five* Vonnegut sought to warn his audience to always question assumptions. Following WWII, American leaders were terrified of another global battle. They pointed to the one event that they believed led directly to WWII and said never again. Never again would they repeat the mistakes of the Munich Conference. Never again would they give an aggressor even an inch because no doubt they would steal a mile. These determinations greatly informed foreign policy decisions following the war. Aggression in Iran, Greece, and Turkey was met with staunch American opposition. Aggression in Korea led to an American war. And finally, aggression in Vietnam wrangled the US into a long-term involvement of questionable intent and ultimate defeat.

The Munich analogy was taken for granted by the American people and American leaders. Therefore the analogy could be cited to scare citizens into supporting an extensive and invasive foreign policy and WWII could be pointed at to justify the rightness of any intervention.

Even contemporary artists were silent, choosing to focus on the boredom of suburban life in the 1950s rather than the fresh wounds of the war. The veterans of WWII returned home to this culture of repression with no way to work through their trauma. One brave veteran, with the writing skills to record his experiences, set about telling his story with the dual purpose of walking his own path to healing and exposing the nation to

the truth about WWII. Vonnegut spent twenty-four years finding the right way to tell his story. It came out jumbled, frantic, and surreal, but that was the story of war.

Literature can be a powerful force for challenging the status quo. Writers like Vonnegut can provide a different perspective on contemporary issues and project that perspective to a wide audience. Vonnegut provided the perspective of a soldier and a prisoner of war, rather than the perspectives of the military and political leaders that stood in the forefront of people's minds when they thought of WWII. *Slaughterhouse Five* gave Americans a truth that they desperately needed as death tolls in Vietnam were skyrocketing upward. By throwing light on a questionable comparison, the Munich analogy, Vonnegut may have cured its adherents of the syndrome and hastened the end of a questionable war.

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