Overview: Pulitzer Prize-winning author Paul Finkel’s latest book, The Good Soldiers, is an engrossing and terrifying account of the sacrifices made by 800 U.S. soldiers from the Second Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment of the United States Army. In clear and concise language, Finkel not only succinctly describes the conditions of Rustamiya, the most dangerous area in Baghdad where the 2-16 was posted, but the hardships and hidden realities of twenty-first century warfare. In a deeply intimate narrative, Finkel captures the compassion, love and sense of brotherhood that existed between the officers and enlisted soldiers who fought, bled and died on the battlefield for one another. Although the 2-16 suffered many casualties, their sacrifices were not in vain. By the time the unit left, fifteen months after their initial deployment, the 2-16 brought more stability to the region, minimized U.S. and Iraqi casualties, implemented a sewage system, and promulgated pro-American sentiment.

Finkel’s most important insight, however, was that while some men were wounded and killed in Iraq, the hidden casualties of war were far more severe. Their inability to identify friend from foe, their separation from their families and loved ones for months on end, and the hours of down time spent wondering when or if they would be killed contributed to feelings of fatigue, mental exhaustion and psychological instability. As Finkel underscores in his book, the rise in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other war induced illnesses had detrimental effects on many of the U.S. soldiers stationed in Iraq. Although the Iraq War, like all wars, was filled with atrocities, murder, death and destruction, the Good Soldiers reminds us how vital the ideals of liberty, freedom and democracy are to the United States, and the sacrifices one particular military unit made to implement and preserve them. The Good Soldiers is an
exceptional work of investigative journalism because it not only gives an intimate glimpse into what daily life was like for American soldiers stationed in Iraq, but it allows the reader to understand, sympathize and recognize how stressful and difficult their jobs were.

How this work can be applied to American Studies: This book would be a perfect addition to AMS 465 Globalization of American Culture seminar. Although we have read scholarly articles regarding the Iraq War, we have failed to discuss what soldiers experienced in Iraq, whether or not they supported the war, or how the theatre of war has changed over time. These important questions yet to be examined would add a new dynamic to our curriculum.