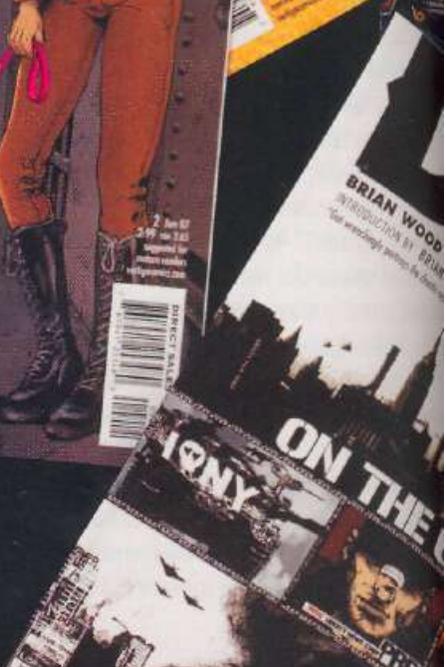
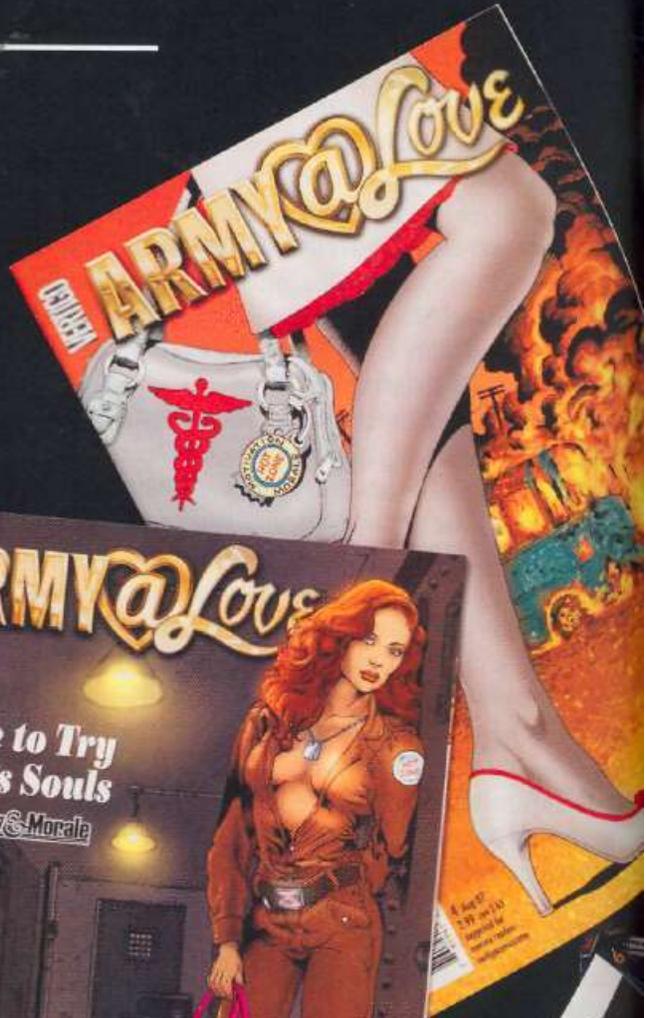
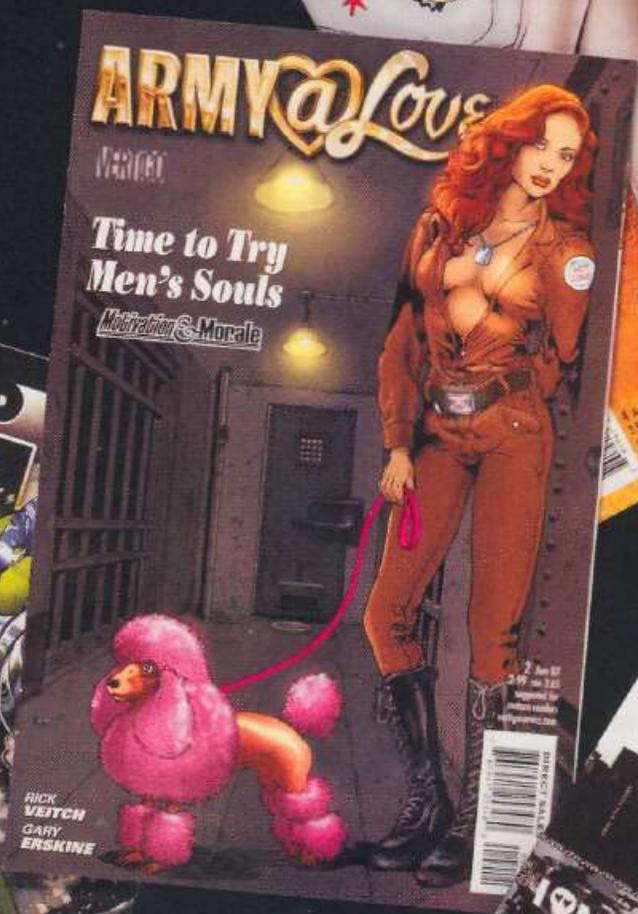
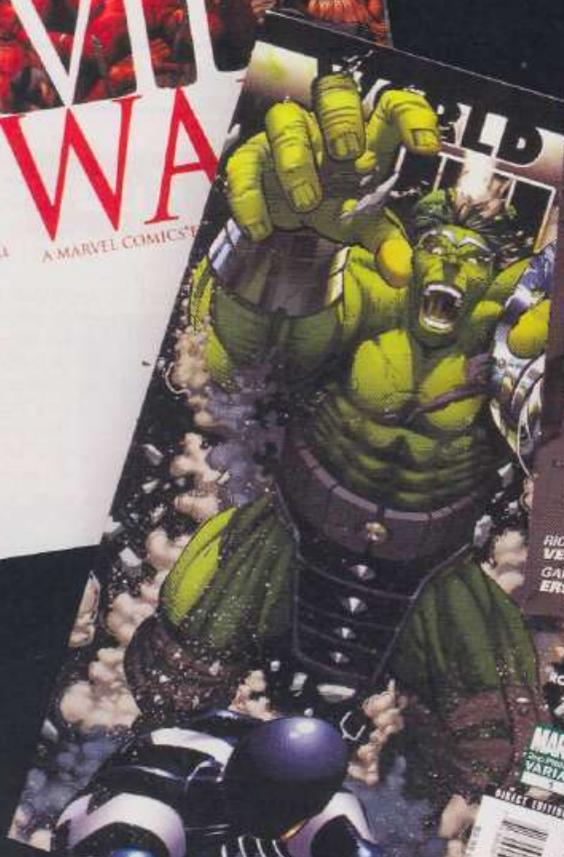
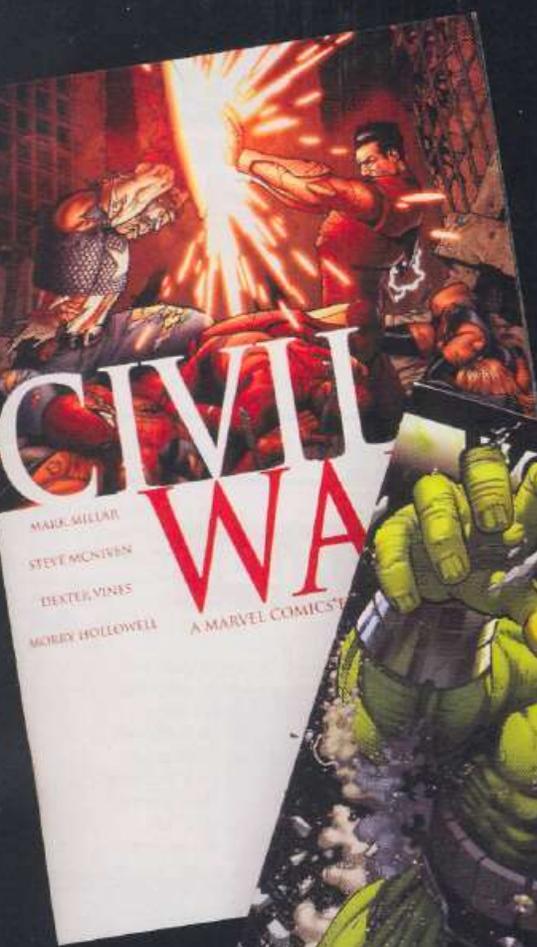

DRAWING FIRE

Contemporary comics take a hard look at the conflict in Iraq, and metaphors abound.

By Douglas Wolk



A ROCKET EXPLODES in a neighborhood in the middle of a war zone, and a U.S. Army division arrives to survey the scene. The commander turns to the embedded photojournalist who's been traveling with them and suggests a way to characterize the photographs he's taking: "'insurgent cell defeated en route to engage American forces' or something. Whatever. And crop out the small bodies."

It could have happened last week in Baghdad or Fallujah. But this scene is set in downtown Manhattan, in the future—in the comic book *DMZ* for Vertigo/DC Comics. Writer Brian Wood and artist Riccardo Burchielli's ongoing series, which imagines a devastating civil war in the United States, is one of a new class of mainstream comics: stories that are clearly responding to the war in Iraq without referring to it directly. Using settings and characters that are futuristic, surreal, or satiric, these new comics go where the network news fears to tread.

Comic books about war have been around almost as long as comics have been on American newsstands—the first, called simply *WarComics*, appeared in early 1940—and most have been exercises in historical

fantasy. Even during the Vietnam War, the likes of *Our Army at War*, which introduced the old-school hero Sgt. Rock in the late '50s, and *The Unknown Soldier* remained morally unambiguous action-adventure stories, safely grounded in World War II. Today's comics have caught up with contemporary culture: they no longer imagine war as glorious, exciting, or even necessary. Jason Aaron and Cameron Stewart's recent Vietnam War graphic novel, *The Other Side*, for instance, is skin-crawling psychological horror, and Joe Sacco's nonfiction book of reportage, *Safe Area Gorazde*, is an unsparing look at a ravaged Balkan war zone. The new wave of comics reflects our understanding of war's miseries and contradictions.

While there are still no mainstream comics set on the battlefield in Iraq, some of the best, and most popular, current series unflinchingly address the conflict and its effect on American culture by looking at both through transforming allegories. Rick Veitch's *Army@Love* (also for Vertigo) pumps up glamorized militarism into a hypersexualized satire; Mark Millar and Steve McNiven's *Civil War*, from Marvel, frames the debate over domestic liberty as a clash of superheroes; and Greg Pak and John Romita Jr.'s *World War Hulk* (Marvel) makes a battle between monsters a vehicle for commenting on insurgency and blowback.

Comics can tackle touchy subjects without coming off as preachy. A detailed critique of the way the U.S. government has abridged personal liberties over the past six years could be overbearing. But *Civil War* made an outsize, blunt allegory out of it and has sold roughly 1.5 million copies on the premise that after a disaster, superheroes

are required to register with and work for the government; any who refuse are exiled without trial to the Guantanamo-like Negative Zone. The series' fight scenes are constructed as battles between the military-industrial complex, as represented by Iron Man (a wealthy weapons dealer who becomes the leader of a huge paramilitary force), and Captain America (who, representing the American civil libertarian impulse, gets killed for his trouble). *Civil War's* writer Mark Millar has claimed, somewhat disingenuously, that all this is only meant to be subtext: "Obviously, there's a certain amount of political



allegory in a story where a guy wrapped in the American flag is in chains as the people swap freedom for security, but I really made an effort to just *make* that stuff the gravy."

If it is gravy, there's certainly plenty of it. The encoding of current events turns up again in *Civil War's* sequel, *World War Hulk*. Here, the setup is that the Hulk's life has been ruined by military and industrial forces (Iron Man and his allies again) claiming to act in the interest of public security. Now the monster has returned to "smash" his enemies, and their self-defense is undercut by the fact that he's more or less justified. As one character puts it: "They kidnapped

him. Transported him. Banished him. Deprived him of due process.... If that isn't casus belli, I don't know what is." The Hulk's allies know that their insurgency, too, will be called monstrous, but they've sworn unending vengeance anyway—"Never stop making them pay" is their motto. And they're finding popular support among civilians fed up with the government's aggression. It's the kind of tangled, violent situation that has become all too familiar of late.

One of the chief differences between the current war in Iraq and earlier wars is the way its public perception and media

Above: *In-Arm@Love*, written by Rick Veitch and drawn by Veitch and Gary Erskine, a romantic soap opera plays out in the middle of a firefight. Right: *World War Hulk*, drawn by John Romita Jr. and Klaus Janson (foreground), and *The Incredible Hulk*, drawn by Gary Frank (background), mix the politics of insurgency with superhero action. Both comics are written by Greg Pak.

During the first Gulf War, says Brian Wood, "Military language became household words. With the current war, they evolved into marketing slogans."



"I met a girl at a party a while ago who writes dirty books. ... I told her I was in advertising and she sneered at me. That is the people's view of advertising in 1970—one step down from dirty books."

—Joel Siegel, quoted in "The Crisis of Advertising," page 23.

as a commentary on Iraq. Images of Herald Square as a bombed-out ruin and the Queens waterfront as a confusion of sniper scopes and military satellite dishes transfer the familiar look of Baghdad under fire to a setting that hits home. "You can watch the war like a TV show, if you want, which is an idea I find equally disgusting and fascinating," says DMZ writer Brian Wood.

"But a side effect of that is it can stop feeling real, it can stop seeming like news, and it dulls you down to the point where you stop thinking or caring that real people are being killed and dying, all in our name."

The wickedly satirical *Army@Love* also alters the circumstances of the war to be more dramatically immediate, though this series' target is the way the war has been commercialized and eroticized. (The name is a wink at *Our Army at War*.) A few years from now, in writer and artist Rick Veitch's story, the army is marketing military service as sexy and exciting, to keep up recruiting numbers for an endless war in "Afbaghistan." The cover of the series' first collection is a Middle East military scene with half-dressed soldiers sprawled across it in the style of a *Vanity Fair* cover. Veitch was interviewed by the *Military Times* and notes that their reporter suggested *Army@Love* "was closer to reality than I thought, especially things like the Hot Zone Club"—Veitch's imagined group of soldiers who've had sex while under fire.

Army@Love, Veitch says, came from "looking at the political and social landscape and being appalled at what I was seeing—how things were developing around the Iraq war, with the industrial, corporate world being melded with the entertainment world. I fictionalized it to give myself greater leeway with the satire, because if you satirize existing things and real people, you get drawn into the political debate on the right and the left, and I'm hoping to operate outside of that." Still, he has some very specific targets. One cover features a sultry redhead in fatigues unbuttoned to her waist, leaning against the wall of a military prison and holding the leash of a poodle. It's an obvious restaging of the infamous photo of Lynndie England at Abu Ghraib.

One of the wittiest installments of DMZ so far also plays with the way the Iraq war's images have been packaged. "New York Times," drawn by Wood himself, is a set of war-journalism vignettes laid out with the aesthetic of an urban listings and lifestyle magazine like *Time Out*. A guide to music venues offers tips on how to avoid snipers while standing in line; a "photo" spread lists its subjects' names, ages, and militia affiliations.

DMZ isn't just a critique of Iraq; it's a commentary on the way a distant conflict is experienced by Americans through media. Wood says the seeds of the series lie in the presentation of the first Gulf War on television. "The thing that struck me was how much access we had at home watching it on TV," he says. "It was such a media-heavy war that we learned the names of theater commanders. We knew what MRE stood for. Military language became household words—phrases like 'on the ground' and 'shock and awe' and 'ink spot'—and with the current war, they evolved into marketing slogans." He adds, "If the Pentagon can use it to sell their war, I can take it and slap it on the cover of my book." **P**

Left: *Civil War*; Front Line, written by Paul Jenkins and drawn by Ramon Bachs and John Lucas (foreground), and *Civil War* written by Mark Miller and drawn by Steve McNiven and Dexter Vines (background) show journalists debating Patriot Act-like legislation and demigods quoting Lloyd Bentsen.