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Warmongering Over Warmbier: US Hypocrisy and a Double Standard on North Korea



Drawing by Nathaniel St. Clair

Warmbier Was a Victim

Otto Warmbier enjoyed New Year's Eve in 2015 in Pyongyang a few weeks after his 21st birthday. In a country with freedom of expression that is not at war with the US, that would not have been any kind of risky behavior, but Pyongyang has been at war with Washington for 70 years. That is one long, very costly fight, and tensions were high in

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December 2015. A fellow traveler said of Warmbier, “Oh gosh, he’s really out of his league here.” They stayed at Yanggakdo Hotel where there was a hidden floor. Forbidden fruit that got him in trouble? Even with such rare and exotic luxuries as a “swimming pool, a bowling alley, and a mini mart,” nobody would have blamed Warmbier for wanting to take a look around, especially on New Year’s Eve. Little did he know that he was partying inside a “garrison state” that has been under threat of invasion and a second holocaust ever since 1953.

On January 1st in the early hours of the morning, there were 2 hours when Warmbier was incommunicado, but nobody worried about that until January 2nd, when he was detained by North Korean authorities at the airport on his way back to the States. Two and a half months later, on the morning of March 16, 2016 he found himself sentenced to 15 years hard labor in the Supreme Court of North Korea, accused of taking down a “framed propaganda poster.” According to the staff at Friendship Hospital in North Korea, “they received Otto the morning after the trial,” and he was “unresponsive” at that point (Doug Bock Clark, [“The Untold Story of Otto Warmbier, American Hostage,”](#) GQ, July 23, 2018)

In other words, he may have already lost consciousness on March 17th. There seems to be a consensus among experts that he sustained brain damage “sometime in the month following his trial.” One doctor is quoted in a CNN video saying “the earliest images are dated April 2016. Based upon our analysis of those images, the brain injury likely occurred in the preceding weeks,” corroborating what the Friendship Hospital staff said (CNN video [“Questions Surround Warmbier’s Injuries,”](#) starting at 0:55). If his brain damage occurred very soon after his trial, especially if it was only 24 hours later, what happened in that short period of time? Did he have an allergic reaction to a sleeping pill? Was there some kind of accident? Did he lose all hope and attempt suicide? Sadly, nobody knows and we may never find out, especially without a peace treaty ending the Korean War.

Warmbier arrived back in the US on June 13th, 2017 in a comatose state, after 17 months in North Korea. The doctors said he would never recover. December 24th last month (2018), Chief Judge Beryl A. Howell of the US District Court for the District of Columbia wrote that when Warmbier was arrested “he was a healthy, athletic student of economics and business in his junior year at the University of Virginia” with “big dreams.” When he was released to US officials 17 months later, “he was blind, deaf and brain dead.” Healthy one day. Brain dead 17 months later. Conclusion: without a doubt, now we all know, the

government of the DPRK killed him. That judgment was made after the judge had been the recipient of 3 years of US propaganda about this case, just like the rest of us.

Soon after Warmbier's tragic death the pro-US-government propaganda machine went into high gear. The deception ranged from false intelligence reports, to a lie from President Trump, to a journalist's claim of an "extra dose of brutality." His grieving and patriotic father said that it looked like someone had "rearranged his bottom teeth." There is no evidence that these claims are true, and much evidence that they are false. The father who had just lost his son to the interminable Korean War and was also subject to the incessant mass media distortions can be forgiven. If the US were a peace-loving and truth-seeking society, however, many of the professional drum-beaters among the US intelligence community, elite officialdom, and conservative intelligentsia would have lost their posts long ago, as punishment for their dangerous lies, exaggerations, and silences.

The New York Times reported that a "senior American official" had intelligence reports indicating that "Mr. Warmbier had been repeatedly beaten while in North Korean custody." In September 2017, Trump said that Warmbier had been "tortured beyond belief by North Korea," but there were no signs of physical torture, if by "torture" we mean the "broken bones and cuts and cigarette burns" sort of torture.

Warmbier got an "extra dose of brutality," according to the New York Times, but the coroner, Dr. Lakshmi Sammarco, said Warmbier had just a few small scars. There was no evidence of healing or healed fractures. He either lost blood flow to the brain or "stopped breathing." His "body was in excellent condition," she said. "I'm sure he had to have [had] round-the-clock care"—top-notch care in impoverished North Korea.

Regarding the claim that someone had "rearranged his bottom teeth," she said the "teeth [were] natural and in good repair." They did a "virtual autopsy, which is a CT scan of the body," and had a forensic dentist "take a look at the images of the mandible and the lower teeth." The forensic dentist told Dr. Sammarco "very frankly and very directly that there was no evidence of trauma to the teeth. No dental trauma whatsoever."

Dr. Michael Flueckiger, the man sent to North Korea to care for Warmbier, signed a report testifying that Otto had been well cared for in the hospital. "I would have been willing to fudge that report if I thought it would get Otto released," Flueckiger said. "But as it turned out... he got good care, and I didn't have to lie." Otto was well nourished, had no bedsores, and his skin was in excellent condition for someone who had been in a coma for over a year.

Anyway, it is very unlikely that North Korea would physically torture Warmbier in that context. As mentioned above, based on the available evidence, it is very possible that his brain damage began the very next day after he was sentenced to hard labor. Why would Warmbier be physically tortured immediately after his sentencing? The propaganda message had already been delivered to the world: “Don’t mess with us.” And, “Don’t touch our framed propaganda posters.”

Andrei Lankov, the prominent North Korea expert and historian said that if a North Korean had done what Otto had, “they would be dead or definitely tortured,” i.e., the classic Stalinist, broken-bonetype of torture. (That is assuming, of course, that Warmbier is indeed the one in the video who took down the poster). According to a high-level North Korean defector, “North Korea treats its foreign prisoners especially well. They know someday they will have to send them back.”

We can say with some confidence, then, that even in the midst of the high-stakes exchange of threats between Washington and Pyongyang, and even while North Korea may have used Warmbier as a pawn in this chess game called the Korean War, he was, in fact, not dealt an “extra dose of brutality.” He got the usual dose of mistreatment—probably the same sort of psychological torture that other Americans in his situation in North Korea have received. He was caught in the crossfires of the struggle between Washington and Pyongyang.

Agents of the US mass media invited Otto’s father, Fred, for an interview and released his video claiming that “North Korea is not a victim” without fact-checking or corrective commentary (Amy B Wang and Susan Svrluga, “Otto Warmbier’s parents lash out: ‘North Korea is not a victim. They’re terrorists,’” Washington Post, 26 September 2017). North Korea had been removed from the US list of “State Sponsors of Terrorism” in 2008, but surely Warmbier’s tragedy is one reason that Trump put them back on it in November 2017. Despite the paucity of evidence supporting the claim of physical torture, the damage to peace was done. Warmbier’s tragic death might have led some Americans toward serious soul searching, asking why we let this war continue. Sadly, such soul searching is not in evidence, at least not on television, in the papers, or on the Internet. The Korean War that was paused or slowed down in 1953 took the lives of millions of Koreans, many hundreds of thousands of Chinese, and perhaps one hundred thousand US and US-allied soldiers. Some of those people were perpetrators of unjust violence; almost all were victims of yet another pointless war with the ultimate goal of consolidating global hegemony. Mindless violence, not judgments in a court of law.

Recall the tensions in 2015 that led up to Warmbier's extreme detention. One year before on that very same day, the 2nd of January when Warmbier was detained, Washington enacted financial sanctions on the North Korean Special Operation Force and ten North Korean government officials in retaliation for the Sony Pictures Entertainment hack before we knew the identity of the perpetrator of the attack.

One can imagine that from the perspective of Pyongyang, some progress was being made toward peace, in spite of Seoul's anti-North stance. There were a reunion of families and a resumption of civilian exchanges. But the US was getting in the way of peace once more through its US-ROK joint military training.

President Obama was in his last year in office and most observers believed that the Democrats would win the next presidential election, so Pyongyang probably expected to get more of the same treatment during the next administration, i.e., zero dialog, zero moves toward reconciliation.

Park Geun-hye, the authoritarian and daughter of a former dictator was in power. Her government was widely viewed as corrupt. Pyongyang called it a "fascist autocratic pro-U.S. and pro-Japan government with no sense of human rights"—not far from the mark, it seems, in light of the fact that one out of every three people in South Korea went out on the streets to support the Candlelight Revolution that unseated her.

North Korea and Russia declared 2015 a "year of friendship" and trade with Russia increased. Meanwhile, Russia's relations with the West deteriorated. In June 2015, there was a drought in Korea and North Korean food production declined while deadly sanctions that starve thousands of innocent civilians every year remained in place. Obama embarked on a trillion-dollar nuclear weapons upgrade as tensions over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program rose. It was in that brutal, business-as-usual environment that Warmbier was unjustly detained.

Felipe and Jakelin Were Victims

A cursory comparison of North Korea's detentions of non-citizens would show that the injustices resulting from their past detentions are almost as bad as US detentions. Pyongyang and Washington are in a race to the bottom in terms of human rights violations, and Pyongyang is in a close second behind Washington in most categories, except for the one called "wars of aggression," of course.

First, let's recall that the US is a land of immigrants, so we should know how to treat non-Americans in a humane fashion by now; that ours is a rich country with more than enough resources to provide basic health care to prisoners; and that our journalists enjoy freedom

of speech, so it is easier for them to do something about Our Government's abuse of foreign prisoners.

Here are some of the facts that Americans should consider. We should take out the plank from our own eyes before we concern ourselves with the speck of sawdust in the eyes of North Koreans. According to Human Rights Watch, our "abusive detention conditions are also a concern. Human Rights Watch released an analysis of the US government's own investigations into the deaths of 18 immigrants in custody from 2012 to 2015, revealing dangerously substandard medical care in 16 cases, contributing to the deaths of seven people. Other organizations have documented similar problems in facilities across the country, indicating severely inadequate oversight over a detention system of 200-plus facilities, including privately run facilities and local jails."

We also cannot forget the most recent cases of incarcerated children dying in our custody. Felipe Gómez Alonzo (8) and Jakelin Amei Rosmery Caal Maquín (7), both from Guatemala, died in December of last year while in US custody. Although they were not charged with any crime, their parents were not allowed to see their children alive, unlike Fred and Cindy Warmbier, who got one last look and were able to see what North Korea had done to their son. The US government "claims Jakelin had journeyed for days through the desert without food and water and was beyond help before she was taken into custody. However, her father says he saw to it that she was eating and drinking. The president of the American Academy of Pediatrics says her death was without doubt preventable" ("Jakelin Caal Maquin Died at the Border. What Happened to Her is Not an Aberration," LA Times, 18 December 2018).

Both Felipe and Jakelin were from indigenous communities in Guatemala. People who speak indigenous languages are more often denied medical assistance than those who speak non-indigenous languages in our country. "A man was deported with a broken collarbone protruding from his skin," according to a report from the Center for Migration Studies. Others are "deported with injuries and in poor condition, some unable to walk and many dehydrated and hungry."

Last year Our Government kidnapped at least 2737 children from their parents and detained them. Some thousands had already been "separated" before April 2018 when the practice became public. Some of those "separated" children may never see their parents again because the US deported them and does not know how to contact them. Another 118 were kidnapped between July and early November after Trump's executive order in June to

end the evil practice. These are not 21 year olds. They are children. Some Americans are protesting this pre-fascist policy, but it continues.

Our Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is a multibillion-dollar federal agency, but they cannot find the resources to ensure the health of the children whom they have kidnapped from the arms of their guardians. Texas US Rep. Joaquin Castro called the “accommodations for migrants inadequate and said the CBP lacked the necessary expertise to provide proper care.” Members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, who toured the US Border Patrol stations after the death of Jakelin, said “immigrants who are picked up in this desolate stretch of the U.S-Mexico border are held in cramped spaces and lack adequate bathroom facilities.” Many are crossing at dangerous sections of the border due to inhumane policies making it difficult to legally cross the border in a safer way.

These two Guatemalan children died this past month under conditions that reek of sub-standard health care. Like Warmbier’s parents, the mothers and fathers of these children were not allowed to be with their children or comfort them during their detention, even after it was clear that their physical condition was rapidly deteriorating.

Judge Howell has awarded Warmbier’s parents 500 million dollars, which is 2% of the GDP of North Korea. We can trust that Our Government will not set up any racist double standards though. Soon enough Felipe and Jakelin’s parents will be awarded at least many billions of US dollars, naturally, the fair thing to do. (Our per capita GDP is around \$50,000. North Korea’s is one or two thousand).

As the Wall Street Journal wrote, “as he considers what terms to accept from the US, Kim Jong-un should never forget the cruel nature of the Trump regime.” Here is my advice for Mr. Kim: “When you negotiate the end of the Korean War with Mr. Trump next month, watch out. You are dealing with some shady characters.” Oops! I got the names mixed up in the Wall Street Journal quote—so easy to do when you are talking about human rights violations of people the government detains. US, North Korea, same difference.

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