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## *The Militarization of Empathy*



Photograph by Joshua Frank

ABC News carried an “America Strong”-type segment of a boy, about to celebrate his 9<sup>th</sup> birthday, opening a large gift, with his mother, out of sight of the camera, asking him, “Who sent you this special package?” Referring to his deployed soldier- father, he replies, “The best daddy in the whole wide world.” He opens the big package, and finds a smaller package inside – and a note. He stares at the note, then exclaims, “He actually wrote this!” He begins to read his father’s message: “I am so sorry but there have been quite a few problems happening here, and it looks like I will not be able to be home for your birthday this year.” The boy starts to choke up, and slowly and sadly continues to

read his father's note: "I am so sorry. I hope you understand. I would have done anything to be with you. I was able to get you a special surprise. So I hope it makes up for me not coming home. I love you with all my heart. I miss you very much. Daddy."

Then he holds the letter to his face and burst into tears. ("Deployed dad surprises son on his birthday,"ABC News, May 6, 2018)

The boy's mother encourages him to open the smaller box – as if what he had read had not affected her. He reacts angrily, "You were about to cry, too!" But he takes her advice, and opens the small package. Inside was a note that read, "Surprise." He looks around, bewildered. He then looks up and sees his father, who suddenly appears from a hallway, He throws aside the big box, runs across the room and flies into his father's arms, crying, "Daddy! Daddy! I miss you! I miss you!" (Ibid) It was enough to melt one's heart, and lead one to not think about what "daddy" might have been doing overseas.

The militarizing of empathy is repeatedly employed by mainstream media in their airing of heartstring-pulling stories of soldiers' surprise homecomings. There are the soldiers dressed in disguises: like the father, after a year in Afghanistan, arriving home in a fire truck, decked out in firefighting gear and gas mask. Kneeling before his two daughters, he took off his gas mask, and the surprised daughters cried out, "Daddy!," and hugged him, "with tears of joy," much to the delight of a gathered crowd.

Another is a blindfolded son in a martial arts class, sparring with his instructor. Then his father, dressed in fatigues, replaces the instructor, and as they spar — with an American flag in the background — the father says with a smile, "Keep it going." The son spars more slowly, and his father comments, "Come on! Is that all you got?." Knowing that voice, the son quickly pulls off the blindfold and sees his father right in front of him. He says, "Daddy!," and leaps into his father's arms, as the class bursts into applause.

Santa Claus is a common disguise returning soldiers use to surprise their loved ones. But one soldier engaged Santa himself to surprise his two daughters. The daughters, along with their mother, sat next to Santa in a Tennessee mall. Santa asked the two girls, "Do you guys know what you want for Christmas?" The narrator answered: "All Jordan wants for Christmas was for her daddy, who was in the Army and deployed for nine months, to come home for the holidays." Jordan and her little sister were unaware that their father was hiding behind Santa Claus. Suddenly he appeared with outstretched arms, and Jordan cried out, "Daddy!" and ran into his arms, with her little sister

following. A large crowd had gathered, and the narrator said, “There was not a dry eye in the mall.”

The militarizing of empathy is extensive indeed. A soldier coming home to surprise his wife, who is in a hospital’s NICU Unit, holding one of her two premature twin daughters — with their two other young children at home. She looks up at him and breaks down, sobbing.

A second grade girl speaks at a school assembly about the importance of supporting military men and woman overseas, as her father, in Army fatigues, appears behind her on the stage and walks up and surprises her, with the whole assemble applauding. An army mother, away from home for over a year, returns to her fourth and second grade daughters’ school, and, during an assembly, “gives them the surprise of a lifetime.”

A son’s high school graduation takes on even more special meaning as his soldier-father surprises him on that special day. A chief petty officer-father deployed overseas returns to surprise and hug his son on the football field, as the son plays in his final home high school football game. A Navy mother, deployed five months, surprises her nine-year-old daughter at her school’s Veterans Day ceremony, the auditorium filled with children waving American flags, and veterans of past wars as guests – and, “in a touching moment,” all clapping when the mother appears on stage and her unsuspecting daughter sees her, moves quickly to the stage, and they embrace.

These examples are the tip of mainstream media’s militarizing of empathy. Military families, separated by America’s so-called “global war on terrorism,” are suddenly reunited – briefly — in surprise homecomings. These emotionally charged reunions lead viewers to tearfully identify strongly with the families — and by extension with our government’s global warring . Or, viewers’ joyful identification with reuniting military families serves to lead them not to think about America’s endless warring. The result is the reinforcement of patriotic allegiance and amnesia. Here empathy is militarized in the service of America’s pursuit of world domination.

The surprise military homecomings stir viewers’ hearts, deflecting their attention from contrary realities created by the U.S. military. The soldier-father who surprises his second grade daughter at a school assembly, and brings cheers and tears to everyone’s eyes, distances attention from the horrors created by former president George W., Bush’s falsely-based, bipartisan-supported, criminal invasion of Iraq.

A January 2004 survey by the Iraq Ministry of Education, assisted by UNICEF, reveals the reality kept hidden by soldiers' surprise school homecomings. UNICEF Iraq Representative Roger Wright stated the survey's findings: "Today millions of children in Iraq are attending schools that lack even basic water and sanitation facilities, have crumbling walls, broken windows and leaky roofs." The causes include a decade of U.S. sanctions that created neglect and underfunding, and the March 2003 U.S. invasion and bombing of "over 700 primary schools – "a third of those in Baghdad — with more than 200 burned and over 3,000 looted." Wright reveals a common unreported reality: "Iraq used to have one of the finest school systems in the Middle East," ("Iraq's Schools Suffer From Neglect and War,"www.unicef.org)

Television viewers repeatedly see American school children crying for joy over their military fathers' surprise homecoming school visits, but not Iraqi school children crying for grief over the loss of their schools –and especially sobbing over the countless deaths of, and injuring to, their fathers and mothers and other family members. The very empathy that transcends differences and enables all people to identify with each other is tribalized, i.e., transformed in the service of American imperialism, blotting out the humanness and rights of those our government identifies – and our media dutifully reports — as enemies.

The reality is far more than an American soldier returning home to surprise and comfort his wife and two premature daughters in a hospital's neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) . In 2015 in Afghanistan, a U.S. warplane bombed a Doctors Without Borders/Sans Frontieres (MSF) trauma hospital, repeatedly hitting "the main central hospital building, housing the intensive care unit, emergency rooms, and physiotherapy ward," killing "12 staff members and 10 patients, including three children." The MSF had provided identification of its location to avoid being bombed; and afterwards "condemned the attack as a war crime," and "demand[ed] a full and transparent investigation into the event be conducted by an independent international body." ("Afghanistan: Kunduz Trauma Center Bombing,"www.doctorswithoutborders, Oct. 7, 2017)

Television viewers can see the relief in the exhausted face of the premature twins-birth-giving mother as her husband suddenly appears and touches her shoulder, and she looks up at him and begins sobbing. But viewers won't see the horror of American-bombed patients screaming as they burn to death in their hospital beds. (Ibid)

The reality is much more than about a mother and her two young daughters visiting Santa Claus at a shopping mall, and Santa "granting" the older daughter's wish: their father

suddenly appears for the holidays, his daughters joyfully hug him, and all the shoppers who had gathered clap and are moved to tears.

The reality is also about another shopping center: a bustling market in Syria that was suddenly devastated by U.S. bombs. According to a new Human Rights Watch report, “U.S. military aircraft bombed a crowded marketplace” and “a school housing displaced people.” HRW investigators “visited the sites ... and collected the names of at least 84 civilians who died in the bombings, including 30 children.” (‘DOZENS OF CIVILIANS KILLED WHEN U.S. BOMBED A SCHOOL AND A MARKET IN SYRIA.’ By Murtaza Hussain, The Intercept, Sept. 25, 2017)

Also, “the independent monitoring group AirWars” reported that “coalition strikes in Iraq and Syria have killed between 5,343 and 8,223 civilians since the bombs began falling in August 2014.”(Ibid) AirWars provides a service by countering the Pentagon’s repeated undercount of civilian victims in America’s wars. But these are still numbers without the names of the victims, facts without the faces of the dead and their anguished loved ones and neighbors.

Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, head of U. S. military operations, seemed to be speaking out of three sides of his mouth in explaining the civilian casualties. As reported, he said, “The Coalition will continue to take great care in our targeting to protect civilians from harm but we must maintain our course.” He added that “responsibility for any civilian deaths lay solely with ISIS.” And he “praised the Trump administration for having ‘freed us up a bit to prosecute the war in a more aggressive manner.’” (Ibid) Meanwhile, at all of America’s bustling malls, President Trump promised that shoppers will be able to “say merry Christmas again.”

The contrasting realities are numerous. Sgt. Joseph P. Collette, A soldier killed in combat in Afghanistan, is memorialized at a church, after a motorcade carries his remains to his hometown, as “onlookers lined the streets to honor” him. In Afghanistan, memorializing a deceased loved one carries grave risk. A U.S. warplane was reported to have bombed a house, killing “four women and 10 children . . . as well as two men.” According to “Mohammad Hashim Alokzai, a member of Parliament from Helmond, The next day, Friday, male relatives of the victims gathered for a mass funeral, and as they were burying their dead, they were caught by another American airstrike, Alokzai said, killing 13 men.” He wondered, “‘We don’t know what happened to NATO that they are targeting innocent civilians.’” (‘American Airstrikes in Taliban Area Kill 29

Afghans Despite Peace Talks,” By Taimoor Shah and Fahim Abed, The New York Times, Jan, 26, 2019)

It’s the same horror story with weddings, in Afghanistan and Iraq – and Yemen. Tom Engelhardt, creator and editor of [tomdispatch.com](http://tomdispatch.com), provides a record of American air power bombing Afghan, Iraq and Yemen weddings. He cites wedding massacres, including “seven . . . gathered by TomDispatch’s Erika Eichelberger.” One massacre is of “more than 100 revelers [who] die in a village in Eastern Afghanistan after an attack by B-52 and B-1B bombers.” In Iraq, another wedding is bombed, with “at least 42 dead, ‘including 27 members of the [family hosting the wedding ceremony], their wedding guests, and even the band of musicians hired to play at the ceremony’ in an attack by American jets.” (“Tomgram: Engelhardt, Washington’s Wedding Album from Hell,” By Tom Engelhardt, [www.tomdispatch.com](http://www.tomdispatch.com))

Tom Engelhardt’s point: “If the Taliban or Iranians or the North Koreans piled up such figures . . . we would classify them as barbarians, savages, evildoers. You might imagine that such a traffic jam of death and destruction would at least merit some longer-term attention,” Engelhardt continues. “But with the rarest of exceptions, it is nowhere to be found, right, left, or center, in Washington or Topeka, in everyday conversations, or think-tank speak.” (Ibid) Here is an example of the complicity of mainstream media in promoting America’s unnecessary global wars.

Almost 3,000 people were killed and over 6000 injured during the horrific 9/11 attacks against America. Rather than any national self-examination to determine the cause of the attacks, former president George W. Bush used the attacks as a pretext to launch a global war on terrorism, and unnecessarily invaded Afghanistan, and then Iraq, falsely claiming that President Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

Recent figures on the number of civilians killed by the U. S. military since the 9/11 attacks? A survey by the Cost of War Project at Brown University, referenced by The Interceptwriter Murtaza Hussain, discloses the total death toll “numbers from the U.S. wars in . . . . Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan . . . while conservatively estimated, are staggering.” Brown’s survey “estimate[s] that at least 480,000 people have been directly killed by direct acts of violence over the course of these conflicts, more than 244,000 of them civilians.” And “the number of indirect deaths – those resulting from disease, displacement, and the loss of critical infrastructure – is believed to be several times higher, running into the millions.” The survey does not include “the conflicts in Libya,



Yemen, Somalia or Syria – where the U.S. has conducted major military operations in recent years.” (“America Needs to Reckon with the Death Toll on Post-9/11 Wars.” By Murtaza Hussain, The Intercept, Nov. 19, 2018)

Murtaza Hussain points out: “The initial confrontation with Al Qaeda , a clandestine organization numbering perhaps a few hundred people at the time of the 9/11 attacks, has somehow metamorphosed into an endless war against an expanding universe of even more extreme terrorist groups, many of which did not even exist on September 11, 2001” at the time of the 9/11 attacks. Hussain continues to pursue U.S. reckoning: “Entire cities have been left in ruins, with the United States offering no coherent strategy for a return to stability, or even normalcy, in the places it has been at war.” (Ibid) The aim appears to be that of creating endless enemies to guarantee normalizing endless war – and endless corporate profit and political power.

Journalist Hussain then quotes Daphne Eviatar, director of the Security With Human Rights program at Amnesty International USA, who asks a question that should be on the minds of all Americans. She says, ““Hundreds of thousands of people have now been killed in the name of fighting terrorism,”” and adds, “We need to ask who benefits from this, who has suffered, and what the cumulative effects are.”” (Ibid)

Our government keeps telling us citizens that we are benefiting because America’s military is protecting our security. Tell that to anxious and depressed children whose military fathers and mothers are deployed and separated from them for many months or a year or more at a time. Children whose emotional fragility is seen when their father sudden returns and surprises them and they hug him, crying, “Daddy, I miss you! I miss you!”

A reported “large body of research . . . shows the negative impact on children, youth and families of U.S. military personnel,” with “children of military families often experience[ing] multiple stressors before and during their parent’s deployment and when they come home.” In addition, “according to the Department of Veterans Affairs . . . One in five Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, roughly 300,000 individuals, suffer from PTSD or major depression.” And “veterans with PTSD commit acts of domestic violence at rates greater than veterans without PTSD, and at rates greater than the general population.” (“Trauma Faced by Children of Military Families.” By Fianna Sogomonyan and Janice L. Cooper, National Center for Children in Poverty, May 2010) America’s wars are creating insecurity, not security.

Who benefits from America's war on terrorism, which has morphed into an endless armed global conflict? Certainly the military/industrial/intelligence complex profits – with unending war, a golden goose that keeps on giving. Former president George W. Bush, who started the unnecessary wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, benefited, as the wars helped him and members of his administration to gain a second term.

There are nearly 800 U.S. military bases in some 70 countries around the globe. They are not about protecting Americans, but about turning a profit on producing weaponry and protecting capitalism's pursuit of world domination. (See "[America's Global Military Bases Actually Undermine National Security. Here's How.](#)" By David Nine, Foreign Policy in Focus, Originally published in TomDispatch, Sept. 26, 2015)

Obviously most Americans don't benefit from the war on terrorism. Some 7,000 have been sacrificed on the altar of America's imperialistic pursuits, with hundreds of thousands more injured. The government's priority is reducing the taxes of corporations and the wealthy and raising the Pentagon's budget, not providing adequate education, job opportunities and health care for citizens. The lack of opportunities forces disadvantaged people of color and white persons to join the military, as it is the only option that offers work, training housing, food, travel, perks and future educational benefits. Tragically, young men and young of limited means are manipulated into providing the bodies for America's endless imperialistic wars. And, ironically, the medical care provided for returning veterans does not match the heroes' sendoff they receive as recruits from politicians and sportscasters at public events. (See "[Lack of access to mental health services contributing to high suicide rates among veterans.](#)" By Ronald D. Hester, [ijmhs.biomedcentral.com](http://ijmhs.biomedcentral.com), Aug. 18, 2017) Tragically, they serve as pawns in the patriotic promotion of imperial wars.

America's global war on terrorism should be a major moral concern of people of faith. The victims of this now normalized, unending immoral war are the countless human beings killed, injured and uprooted by America's military. Its victims are also the men and women in the U.S. armed forces and their families – and other Americans prevented, by a bloated Pentagon budget, from receiving an adequate education, job opportunities and health care.

Morally outraging also to people of faith should be the militarizing of empathy: the high-jacking and nationalizing of a universal religious ethic that inspires people to transcend tribalism and identify with each other. That ethic is shared by most religions. In



Christianity: “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you: for this is the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:12) In Judaism: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.” (Hillel, Talmud, Shabbath 31a) In Islam: “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.” (The Prophet, Muhammad, Hadith) In Jainism: “One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated.” (Mahavira, Sutakritanga 1.11.33)

All children everywhere fly into their father’s arms and cry out, “Daddy I miss you.! I miss you!”

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