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## *Perspectives on the Storming of the Capitol from a Military Spouse*



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“Are you okay?” asked a friend and military spouse in the voicemail she left me on the afternoon the mob of Trump supporters breached the Capitol so violently. At home with a new baby, her Navy reservist husband stationed in Germany, the thoughts running through her head that day would prove remarkably similar to mine. As she said when we spoke, “It’s as if the U.S. has become a war zone.”

Do a Google search and you’ll find very little suggesting that the January 6th attack on the Capitol in any way resembled a war. A notable exception: a *Washington Post*-ed by former Missouri secretary of state and Afghanistan combat veteran Jason Kander. He saw that day’s violence for the combat it was and urged congressional representatives and

others who bore the brunt of those “armed insurrectionists” to seek help (as, to his regret, he hadn’t done after his tours of duty in combat zones).

Now, take a look back at that “riot” and tell me how it differs from a military attack: President Trump asked his supporters to “fight like hell” or “you’re not going to have a country anymore.” He swore he would go with them, though he didn’t, of course, just as those who launched and continued our “forever wars” of the last almost 20 years sent Americans to fight abroad without ever doing so themselves. Trump’s small army destroyed property with their metal baseball bats and other implements of aggression, in one case even planted pipe bombs near Republican and Democratic party headquarters (that didn’t go off), and looted congressional chambers, including carrying away House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s lectern.

The rioters used intimidation against those in the Capitol. Some screamed insults like “traitor” and the n-word (reserved, of course, for the black police officers protecting Congress). One rioter wore a sweatshirt emblazoned with the words “Camp Auschwitz,” a reference to the Nazi death camp. Make no mistake: the America these rioters envisioned was one full of hate and disdain for difference.

In their disregard for pandemic safety protocols, they employed the equivalent of biological warfare against lawmakers and the Capitol police, breaking into the building, screaming and largely unmasked during a pandemic, forcing lawmakers to jam into enclosed spaces to save (but also endanger) their own lives. The rioters smeared blood on walls and on the busts of former presidents. Their purpose was clear: to overturn democratic processes by brute force in the name of what they saw as an existential threat to their country, the certification of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as president and vice president.

Among those aggressors were veterans and some active-duty personnel from elite U.S. combat forces (as well as from police departments) who brought years of expertise to bear on orchestrating an attempted takeover of our government, based — much like the costliest of our still-ongoing wars, the one in Iraq — on lies told by their commander in chief (“Stop the steal!”).

### **My Own Personal War**

To fight wars, you need to summon a mix of rage, adrenaline, and disregard for the humanity of those whose project you seek to annihilate. That seemed evident in the mob of the supposedly pro-law-and-order president that attacked Congress, their acts leading to five deaths – including that of Capitol Hill police officer Brian Sicknick, a former New

Jersey Air National Guard member. More than 140 police officers who tried to protect lawmakers sustained injuries. Some, who were not given helmets prior to that day, are now living with brain injuries (which, as a therapist, I can assure are likely to come with debilitating lifelong implications). Another officer has two cracked ribs and smashed spinal disks. Yet another was stabbed by a rioter with a metal fence stake. Still another lost his eye.

These deaths and injuries will have ripple effects for the spouses, children, friends, employers, and others in the communities where those officers live. And they do not include the countless invisible injuries (such as post-traumatic stress disorder) that result from such war-like scenarios. In this respect, the cost of armed violence to human life is incalculable.

While that attack on the Capitol was underway, at the tiny community mental health clinic where I work as a therapist, I was speaking to clients who had migrated here from countries plagued by armed conflict. I listened to concerns that the far-right nationalist attack on the Capitol would, sooner or later, inspire violence against their own families. After all, those storming the Capitol backed a president who had referred to immigrants as “animals” and whose administration had put the children of undocumented migrants in cages – or sub-prison like conditions with zero-provision for their care. In the days after the attack, an acquaintance of mine, an African American man, was indeed pursued by a carful of people wearing Trump hats and shouting racial slurs. (They slowed their vehicle and followed him down the road towards his Maryland apartment.)

The day of the riots, I arrived home from my job to find my husband, a Naval officer, in front of the television news, tears in his eyes and sweat dripping down his face. My children, unprepared for bed (as they should have been), were staring at him in confusion. That night, he and I bolted awake at every sound, as we had in the weeks after Trump was first elected.

Of course, given our incomes and our home in the countryside outside Washington, D.C., we were about as far from danger as one could imagine. Still, our sense of distress was acute. After the riot was over, my husband, gritting his teeth, wondered: “Why aren’t the Capitol floors covered in rioters in zip ties right now?” We noted that, if there had been Black Lives Matter slogans and black fists on the flags and banners those rioters were carrying, the National Guard would have arrived quickly.

As time wore on, my husband and I attempted to comfort each another and explain those televised scenes of violence to our two children, four and five, who had been stunned both

by glimpses of what grownups could do and by how visibly upset their father had become. And we weren't alone. I soon found myself scrolling through texts and voicemails from other military spouses with similar fears who wanted to know if my husband and I were okay and if the violence in the Capitol had made it anywhere near our home.

In our minds, fearful scenarios were playing out about what January 6th might mean for military families like ours — and little wonder, since in those tense two weeks before Joe Biden's inauguration, the military still answered to a commander in chief who had visibly incited the possible takeover of our government. What would the military members of our families be asked to do in the days to come, we wondered, and by whom? What would have happened if those rioters had actually succeeded in hanging Mike Pence or slaughtering other members of Congress?

### **Preparing for War**

In truth, in Donald Trump's America, my spouse and I had been conjuring up scenarios of violence for months. We had found ourselves obsessed with the fears of rising political violence in what, during wartime, used to be known as the home front in the country with the most heavily armed civilian population on Earth. (I had even written about that very subject in those very months.) No wonder then that, before November 3rd, I was so focused not just on dispelling Trumpian disinformation about the election to come, but on helping voters locate their polling stations and finding transportation to them.

As it happens, my husband's jobs in recent years have often involved anticipating war and what our military would do if Americans ever faced it on our own soil. He's served as an officer on a battleship and three nuclear and ballistic-missile armed submarines. He's had to collect intelligence under the leadership of presidents with very different levels of impulse control. Most recently, he's worked for the Joint Chiefs of Staff thinking through scenarios in which the United States might be engaged in nuclear war — and what the costs might be.

Together, we have been amazed at how few Americans, other than our fellow military families,

have been preoccupied with the violence beginning to unfold on our nation's streets and the way, in some strange fashion, America's distant, never-ending wars of these last nearly 20 years were threatening to come home.

One lesson of these years, in an America with an "all-volunteer" military, is that wars essentially don't exist unless you're directly or indirectly involved in fighting them. At no time did that seem more evident to me than on January 6th, in the divergent responses of

my own family and those we know who aren't in the military. If you're interested (as I am as a co-founder of Brown University's Costs of War Project) in how, during these years, voters and their representatives have justified (or simply ignored) the decision to "solve" our global problems with unending war, then you might frame what happened on January 6th in these terms: some 74 million Americans voted for a president who portrayed those who disagreed with him as existential threats to America.

In the meantime, for almost two decades our government has invested staggering, almost unimaginable sums in this country's military machine (and the war-making industries linked to it), while diverting funds from key social services, ranging from healthcare to domestic job creation. Meanwhile, it has consistently "retired" military-grade weaponry from our war zones into the hands of police departments across the country and so onto our city streets. I mean, given such a formula, what could possibly go wrong? Why would anyone connected to the military be worried?

Of course, why wouldn't we worry, since we — or our loved ones — are the people who are ordered to participate when wars of any kind happen?

### **The Isolation of Military Service**

There are about two million Americans who serve in the U.S. military and 2.6 million more who are military spouses and dependents. Altogether that's just a little more than 1% of our entire population. We are, believe me, in another world of fears and worries than the rest of you. We've been involved, directly or indirectly, in fighting those godforsaken wars launched after 9/11 for almost two decades now. You haven't. You've generally thanked us religiously for our "service" and otherwise forgotten about those wars and gone about your business. We haven't. Our sense of the world, our fears, are different than yours.

We military spouses are charged with comforting and caring for those who serve, especially (but not exclusively) when they are sent to one of the many countries where that never-ending "war on terror" continues to be fought into the Biden years. Caring for those who serve is no small task in a country where the very act of trying to get mental-health care could be a career-ending move for a soldier. Families are often their only recourse.

Military spouses also care for children in mourning, temporarily or in some cases permanently, over the loss of a parent. In an anemic military healthcare system, we are often left to marshal the necessary care for ourselves and our children, even as many of us struggle with depression, anxiety, and trauma thanks to the multiple, often unpredictable deployments of those very loved ones and being left alone to imagine what they're going

through. According to a recent op-ed by my colleague and military spouse Aleha Landry, approximately 25% of us are unemployed in this Covid-19 moment. On average, we also earn 27% less than our counterparts in the civilian world, not least of all because the burden of childcare and frequent redeployments prevent us from moving up in our chosen fields of work.

In this pandemic-stricken, distinctly over-armed world of ours, in which nationalist militia groups (often with veterans among them) backing the former president continue to talk about war right here in what, after 9/11, we came to call “the homeland,” it’s not surprising how increasingly anxious people like me have come to feel. Personally, what January 6th brought home was this: as a military spouse, I was living in a community that didn’t know my family, while my husband, in his own personal hell of hypothetical nuclear wars, could be called upon at any time to represent a president who had incited an assault on the Capitol, leaving my children and me alone. And that, believe me, was scary. I was struck, for instance, that a military spouse I became friends with and who occupied a very different part of the political spectrum from me nonetheless feared that, in the event of conflict, she would be vulnerable — and it wasn’t just foreign conflicts that she was worrying about after Trump was elected. At one point, her husband had told her, “If you see a flash in the sky, then take the kids and drive in this direction,” indicating a spot on the map where he felt, based on wind patterns, nuclear fallout was less likely to blow. After the Charlottesville Unite the Right riot of 2017, she stocked up on food, water, and extra gas so she could head for Canada if armed conflict broke out among Americans. “We’d be alone,” she told me, “because obviously, he’d be gone.”

### **Stopping Our Endless Wars**

These, then, are the sorts of fears that arise in my militarized world on this careening planet of ours. Yes, Joe Biden is now president, but this country is still on edge. And the military that’s been fighting those hopeless, bloody wars in distant lands for so long is on edge, too. After all, military personnel were present in significant numbers in that mob on January 6th. Almost one in five members of Trump’s invading crew were reportedly veterans or active military personnel.

Sometimes, the people I feel closest to (when I do my work for the Costs of War Project) are the women who must mother and maintain households in the places my country has had such a hand in turning into constant war zones. Right now, there exist millions of people living in just such places where the anticipation of air raids, drone attacks, suicide bombings, snipers, or sophisticated roadside IEDs is a daily reality. Already, over 335,000

civilians (and counting) have been killed in those foreign war zones of ours. Mothers and their children in such lands are often cut off from hospitals, reliable food, clean water, or the infrastructure that would help them get to school, work, or the doctor. Unlike most Americans, they don't have the luxury of forgetting about war. Their spouses and children are in constant danger.

Democrat or Republican, the presidents of the past 20 years are responsible for the violence that continues in those war zones and for the (not unrelated) violence that has begun to unfold at home — and even, thank you very much, for my own family's fears and fantasies about war, up close and personal. It's about time that all of us in this disturbed country of ours at least bear witness to what such violence means for those living it and start thinking about what the United States should do to stop it. It can't just be the most vulnerable and directly involved among us who lose sleep — not to speak of lives, limbs, mental stability, and livelihoods — due to the cloistered decisions of our public leaders.

Believe this at least: if we can't stop fighting those wars across significant parts of the planet, this country won't remain immune to them either. It hasn't, in fact. It's just that so many of us have yet to fully take that in.

*This story is distributed by [TomDispatch](#).*

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