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America's Child Soldiers

By Tom Engelhardt

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Another week, another revelation about spying by the National Security Agency. This time, it was the NSA's infiltration of online video games and virtual realms like World of Warcraft and Second Life. And it was hardly a shock. More than a decade ago, TomDispatch began reporting on the U.S. military's collaborations with the video game industry, including a virtual world known as There. As the years went by, the military became ever more enmeshed in the digital world. In 2008, while covering the 26th Army Science Conference, I spoke to the chief of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command about a new recruiting initiative he was setting up in the fantasy realm of Second Life. General William Wallace was over the moon about the possibility of engaging with the "four million young people" who had signed onto that virtual online environment.

While the Army was making an overt play for new recruits in the digital universe, the NSA was secretly targeting virtual worlds for clandestine activities. A top-secret 2008 NSA document, leaked by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden to the *Guardian* and shared with the *New York Times* and ProPublica, cast online games as a "target-rich communication network." They were imagined (with little evidence) to be potential terrorist havens and so, as one document gushed, "an opportunity!"

In the time since I spoke to General Wallace, virtual worlds have bloomed. The number of Second Life accounts, for example, has grown to 36 million registered users, according to its creator, Linden Labs. And it seems, as the *Times* and ProPublica reported, that a surprising

number of those new visitors were from the U.S. Intelligence Community. Second Life, in fact, became so thick with spies from the Pentagon, the CIA, and the FBI that it was necessary to create what one of the leaked documents called a "deconfliction" group to keep them from duplicating their efforts, spying on one another, and so turning their online push into a digital snarl.

And yet, after all that virtual snooping, there is no evidence that the untold millions of dollars spent infiltrating digital spies into worlds of pixies, scantily-clad lion-women, and pony skeleton avatars (no, I'm not making these up) has uncovered any terrorists or foiled any al-Qaeda plots. It has, however, allowed the U.S. government to penetrate the lives of the young (and increasingly, the not-so-young) in new and intrusive ways.

Today, Ann Jones, author of the acclaimed new Dispatch Book, *They Were Soldiers: How the Wounded Return from America's Wars – The Untold Story*, examines another way the U.S. military targets America's youth – via a completely non-virtual, off-line, old school social network: the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps. It's a startling look at the sort of everyday military indoctrination that may be happening, possibly in your very neighborhood, and almost as quietly as government agents slip in and out of their favorite digital fantasy worlds.

After recently shining much needed light on what happens to America's veterans once they return from this country's war zones, Jones turns her perceptive gaze on one way the military gets hold of young men and women in the first place. If you thought only countries like Yemen, South Sudan, and Chad had child soldiers, think again. ~ *Nick Turse*

JROTC and the Militarizing of America **By Ann Jones**

Congress surely meant to do the right thing when, in the fall of 2008, it passed the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (CSPA). The law was designed to protect kids worldwide from being forced to fight the wars of Big Men. From then on, any country that coerced children into becoming soldiers was supposed to lose all U.S. military aid.

It turned out, however, that Congress – in its rare moment of concern for the next generation – had it all wrong. In its greater wisdom, the White House found countries like Chad and Yemen so vital to the national interest of the United States that it preferred to overlook what happened to the children in their midst.

As required by CSPA, this year the State Department once again listed 10 countries that use child soldiers: Burma (Myanmar), the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Seven of them were scheduled to receive millions of dollars in U.S. military aid as well as what's called "U.S. Foreign Military Financing." That's a shell game aimed at supporting the Pentagon and American weapons makers by handing millions of taxpayer dollars over to such dodgy "allies," who must then turn around and buy "services" from the Pentagon or "materiel" from the usual merchants of death. You know the crowd: Lockheed-Martin, McDonnell Douglas, Northrop Grumman, and so on.

Here was a chance for Washington to teach a set of countries to cherish their young people, not lead them to the slaughter. But in October, as it has done every year since CSPA became law, the White House again granted whole or partial "waivers" to five countries on the State Department's "do not aid" list: Chad, South Sudan, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Somalia.

Too bad for the young – and the future – of those countries. But look at it this way: Why should Washington help the children of Sudan or Yemen escape war when it spares no expense right here at home to press our own impressionable, idealistic, ambitious American kids into military "service"?

It should be no secret that the United States has the biggest, most efficiently organized, most effective system for recruiting child soldiers in the world. With uncharacteristic modesty, however, the Pentagon doesn't call it that. Its term is "youth development program."

Pushed by multiple high-powered, highly paid public relations and advertising firms under contract to the Department of Defense, the program is a many splendored thing. Its major public face is the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps or JROTC.

What makes this child-soldier recruiting program so striking is that the Pentagon carries it out in plain sight in hundreds and hundreds of private, military, and public high schools across the U.S.

Unlike the notorious West African warlords Foday Sankoh and Charles Taylor (both brought before international tribunals on charges of war crimes), the Pentagon doesn't actually kidnap children and drag them bodily into battle. It seeks instead to make its young "cadets" what John Stuart Mill once termed "willing slaves," so taken in by the master's script that they accept their parts with a gusto that passes for personal choice. To that end, JROTC works on their not-yet-fully-developed minds, instilling what the program's textbooks call "patriotism" and "leadership," as well as a reflexive attention to authoritarian commands.

The scheme is much more sophisticated – so much more "civilized" – than any ever devised in Liberia or Sierra Leone, and it works. The result is the same, however: kids get swept into soldiering, a job they will not be free to leave, and in the course of which they may be forced to commit spirit-breaking atrocities. When they start to complain or crack under pressure, in the U.S. as in West Africa, out come the drugs.

The JROTC program, still spreading in high schools across the country, costs U.S. taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars annually. It has cost some unknown number of taxpayers their children.

The Acne and Braces Brigades

I first stumbled upon JROTC kids a few years ago at a Veterans Day parade in Boston. Before it got underway, I wandered among the uniformed groups taking their places along the Boston Common. There were some old geezers sporting the banners of their American Legion posts, a

few high school bands, and some sharp young men in smart dress uniforms: greater Boston's military recruiters.

Then there were the kids. The acne and braces brigades, 14- and 15-year-olds in military uniforms carrying rifles against their shoulders. Some of the girl groups sported snazzy white gloves.

Far too many such groups, with far too many underage children, stretched the length of Boston Common. They represented all branches of the military and many different local communities, though almost all of them were brown or black in hue: African Americans, Hispanics, the children of immigrants from Vietnam and other points South. Just last month in New York City, I watched similarly color-coded JROTC squads march up Fifth Avenue on Veterans' Day. One thing JROTC is not is a rainbow coalition.

In Boston, I asked a 14-year-old boy why he had joined JROTC. He wore a junior Army uniform and toted a rifle nearly as big as himself. He said, "My dad, he left us, and my mom, she works two jobs, and when she gets home, well, she's not big on structure. But they told us at school you gotta have a lot of structure if you want to get somewhere. So I guess you could say I joined up for that."

A group of girls, all Army JROTC members, told me they took classes with the boys but had their own all-girl (all-black) drill team that competed against others as far away as New Jersey. They showed me their medals and invited me to their high school to see their trophies. They, too, were 14 or 15. They jumped up and down like the enthusiastic young teens they were as we talked. One said, "I never got no prizes before."

Their excitement took me back. When I was their age, growing up in the Midwest, I rose before daybreak to march around a football field and practice close formation maneuvers in the dark before the school day began. Nothing would have kept me from that "structure," that "drill," that "team," but I was in a marching band and the weapon I carried was a clarinet. JROTC has entrapped that eternal youthful yearning to be part of something bigger and more important than one's own pitiful, neglected, acne-spattered self. JROTC captures youthful idealism and ambition, twists it, trains it, arms it, and sets it on the path to war.

A Little History

The U.S. Army Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps was conceived as part of the National Defense Act of 1916 in the midst of World War I. In the aftermath of that war, however, only six high schools took up the military's offer of equipment and instructors. A senior version of ROTC, was made compulsory on many state college and university campuses, despite the then-controversial question of whether the government could compel students to take military training.

By 1961, ROTC had become an optional program, popular at some schools, but unwelcome on others. It soon disappeared altogether from the campuses of many elite colleges and progressive state universities, pushed out by protest against the war in Vietnam and pulled out by the

Pentagon, which insisted on maintaining discriminatory policies (especially regarding sexual preference and gender) outlawed in university codes of conduct. When it gave up "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in 2011 and offered a menu of substantial research grants for such institutions, elite universities like Harvard and Yale welcomed the military back with unbecoming deference.

During ROTC's exile from such institutions, however, it put down roots on college campuses in states that made no fuss about discrimination, while the Pentagon expanded its recruitment program in high schools. Almost half a century after Army JROTC was established, the Reserve Officers Training Corps Vitalization Act of 1964 opened such junior training to all branches of the military. What's more, the number of JROTC units nationwide, previously capped at 1,200, climbed rapidly until 2001, when the very idea of imposing limits on the program disappeared.

The reason was clear enough. In 1973, the Nixon administration discarded the draft in favor of a standing professional "all-volunteer" army. But where were those professionals to be found? And how exactly were they to be persuaded to "volunteer"? Since World War II, ROTC programs at institutions of higher education had provided about 60% of commissioned officers. But an army needs foot soldiers.

Officially, the Pentagon claims that JROTC is not a recruiting program. Privately, it never considered it to be anything else. Army JROTC now describes itself as having "evolved from a source of enlisted recruits and officer candidates to a citizenship program devoted to the moral, physical, and educational uplift of American youth." Yet former Defense Secretary William Cohen, testifying before the House Armed Services Committee in 2000, named JROTC "one of the best recruiting devices that we could have."

With that unacknowledged mission in hand, the Pentagon pushed for a goal first advanced in 1991 by Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: the establishment of 3,500 JROTC units to "uplift" students in high schools nationwide. The plan was to expand into "educationally and economically deprived areas." The shoddy schools of the inner cities, the rust belt, the deep South, and Texas became rich hunting grounds. By the start of 2013, the Army alone was recycling 4,000 retired officers to run its programs in 1,731 high schools. Altogether, Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine JROTC units now flourish in 3,402 high schools nationwide – 65% of them in the South – with a total enrollment of 557,129 kids.

Getting With the Program

Here's how the program works. The Department of Defense spends several hundred million dollars – \$365 million in 2013 – to provide uniforms, Pentagon-approved textbooks, and equipment to JROTC, as well as part of the instructors' salaries. Those instructors, assigned by the military (not the schools), are retired officers. They continue to collect federal retirement pay, even though the schools are required to cover their salaries at levels they would receive on active duty. The military then reimburses the school for about half of that hefty pay, but the school is still out a bundle.

Ten years ago, the American Friends Service Committee found that the true cost of JROTC programs to local school districts was "often much higher – in some cases more than double –

the cost claimed by the Department of Defense." In 2004, local school districts were shelling out "more than \$222 million in personnel costs alone."

Several principals who spoke to me about the program praised the Pentagon for subsidizing the school budget, but in this matter they evidently don't grasp their own school finances. The fact is that public schools offering JROTC programs actually subsidize the Pentagon's recruitment drive. In fact, a JROTC class costs schools (and taxpayers) significantly more than would a regular physical education or American history course – for both of which it is often considered a suitable substitute.

Local schools have no control over the Pentagon's prescribed JROTC curricula, which are inherently biased toward militarism. Many school systems simply adopt JROTC programs without so much as a peek at what the students will be taught. The American Friends Service Committee, Veterans for Peace, and other civic groups have compiled evidence that these classes are not only more costly than regular school courses, but also inferior in quality.

What else but inferior quality might be expected from self-serving textbooks written by competing branches of the military and used by retired military men with no teaching qualifications or experience? For one thing, neither the texts nor the instructors teach the sort of critical thinking central to the best school curricula today. Instead, they inculcate obedience to authority, inspire fear of "enemies," and advance the primacy of military might in American foreign policy.

Civic groups have raised a number of other objections to JROTC, ranging from discriminatory practices – against gays, immigrants, and Muslims, for example – to dangerous ones, such as bringing guns into schools (of all places). Some units even set up shooting ranges where automatic rifles and live ammunition are used. JROTC embellishes the dangerous mystique of such weapons, making them objects to covet, embrace, and jump at the chance to use.

In its own defense, the program publicizes a selling point widely accepted across the United States: that it provides "structure," keeps kids from dropping out of school, and turns boys (and now girls) of "troubled" background into "men" who, without JROTC to save them (and the rest of us *from* them), would become junkies or criminals or worse. Colin Powell, the first ROTC grad ever to rise to the military's top job, peddled just this line in his memoir *My American Journey*. "Inner-city kids," he wrote, "many from broken homes, [find] stability and role models in Junior ROTC."

No evidence exists to prove these claims, however, apart from student testimonials like that offered by the 14-year-old who told me he joined up for "structure." That kids (and their parents) fall for this sales pitch is a measure of their own limited options. The great majority of students find better, more life-affirming "structure" in school itself through academic courses, sports, choirs, bands, science or language clubs, internships – you name it – in schools where such opportunities exist. Yet it is precisely in schools with such programs that administrators, teachers, parents, and kids working together are most likely to succeed in keeping JROTC out. It is left to the "economically and educationally deprived" school systems targeted by the Pentagon

to cut such "frills" and blow their budgets on a colonel or two who can offer students in need of "stability and role models" a promising, though perhaps very short, future as soldiers.

School Days

In one such Boston inner city school, predominantly black, I sat in on JROTC classes where kids watched endless films of soldiers on parade, then had a go at it themselves in the school gym, rifles in hand. (I have to admit that they could march far better than squads of the Afghan National Army, which I've also observed, but is that something to be proud of?) Since those classes often seemed to consist of hanging out, students had lots of time to chat with the Army recruiter whose desk was conveniently located in the JROTC classroom.

They chatted with me, too. A 16-year-old African American girl, who was first in her class and had already signed up for the Army, told me she would make the military her career. Her instructor – a white colonel she regarded as the father she never had at home – had led the class to believe that "our war" would go on for a very long time, or as he put it, "until we've killed every last Muslim on Earth." She wanted to help save America by devoting her life to that "big job ahead."

Stunned, I blurted out, "But what about Malcolm X?" He grew up in Boston and a boulevard not far from the school was named in his honor. "Wasn't he a Muslim?" I asked.

"Oh no, ma'am," she said. "Malcolm X was an American."

A senior boy, who had also signed up with the recruiter, wanted to escape the violence of city streets. He joined up shortly after one of his best friends, caught in the crossfire of somebody else's fight, was killed in a convenience store just down the block from the school. He told me, "I've got no future here. I might as well be in Afghanistan." He thought his chances of survival would be better there, but he worried about the fact that he had to finish high school before reporting for "duty." He said, "I just hope I can make it to the war."

What kind of school system gives boys and girls such "choices"? What kind of country?

What goes on in schools in your town? Isn't it time you found out?