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Worth Dying For?

A tour of Hypocrisy

Peace is our only shelter

Resist the Psychology of War

"I don't know if I'm smart but I think I can see
When someone is pullin' the wool over me.
And if this war comes and death's all around
Let me die in this land 'fore I die underground.
Let me die in my footsteps
Before I go down underground."

—Bob Dylan:
"Let Me Die In My Footsteps"

Patrick Henry

The current saber-rattling between the United States and North Korea has reached a frightening pitch. Kim Jon Un and Donald Trump threatening one another in strikingly bellicose language makes just about everyone uncomfortable. Yet, here in the US, talk of launching a pre-emptive strike and even waging nuclear war against "that rogue nation" can be heard, even in normally moderate circles.

The political situation is a difficult one. Stringent sanctions on North Korea have had little effect. President Trump is urging Beijing to do more to rein in North Korea's nuclear ambitions. China is fearful that South Korea's newly-installed US missile defense system, set up to protect South Korea from the North, might be able to spy on its missiles as well.

South Koreans have multiple concerns. On the one hand, they worry that President Trump will sit down with Kim Jong Un and agree to remove US troops from their country. On the other, they fear that North Korea will unleash its massive conventional weapons stock on them and cause several hundred thousand casualties.

For its part, Japan, justifiably anxious about Pyongyang's latest actions, has to decide on the extent to which it should upgrade its armed forces and whether it should finally decide to acquire cruise missiles, which would allow it to strike a launch site in North Korea if it detected signs of an imminent attack.

North Korea has conducted its sixth and most powerful nuclear weapons test. Even more alarmingly, in an attempt to make Washington aware that its missiles can now reach Guam, Pyongyang has launched a missile that traveled more than 2,000 miles over Japan into the Pacific Ocean. Washington has responded with the threat of a full oil embargo, the claim that "all military options are on the table," the unrealistic demand that Kim Jong Un give up his nuclear weapons, and a fiery speech at the United Nations by President Trump in which he stated that, if the

United States is forced to defend itself or its allies, "we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea."

It is nonetheless abundantly clear that there is no military solution to this stalemate. In this regard, 77% of South Koreans support resuming talks with the North. Only a diplomatic solution is feasible. The threats of massive military responses are simply unhelpful and the thought of waging nuclear war outrageously misguided.

Samuel Johnson once observed that human beings "need to be reminded far more often than they need to be informed." In that vein, let's recall our two nuclear attacks at the end of WW II.

Two days after the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Albert Camus wrote in his newspaper, *Combat*: "Our technological civilization has just reached its greatest level of savagery." A month later, in her September 1945 column in *The Catholic Worker*, Dorothy Day condemned President Truman for having ordered the two atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Ten years later, on June 15, 1955, Day was still among the earliest protesters against nuclear weapons when, outside City Hall in Manhattan, she, A. J. Muste, Ammon Hennacy and 26 others refused to take shelter during compulsory air-raid Civil Defense drills which she considered psychological preparations for nuclear war. Day and the others were arrested, held in jail overnight, found guilty and given suspended sentences.

This was the *Catholic Worker's* first public act of civil disobedience and its protests continued for five years until the Civil Defense authorities ended these compulsory drills. At the initial June 15, 1955 protest, part of the disseminated *Catholic Worker* leaflet read as follows: "We make this demonstration, not only to voice our opposition to war, not only to refuse to participate in psychological warfare which this air raid drill is, but also as an act of public penance for having been the first people in the world to drop the atomic bomb, to make the hydrogen bomb..."

President Trump is not the only recent American president to talk about waging and/or surviving a nuclear war. In 2010, the Obama administration released its strategy for a nuclear strike.¹ Officials claimed that "they [were] moving aggressively to conduct drills, prepare communication guides and raise awareness among emergency planners."

In 2007, Congress had appropriated \$5.5 million for studies on "atomic disaster planning" which, the *New York Times* asserts, have been "revealing." Two such "revealing" findings are that "a bomb's flash would blind many drivers, causing accidents and complicate evacuation" and that "taking shelter [can make] a huge difference in survival rates." Brooke Buddemeier, a Livermore National Laboratory health physicist, called the finding about sheltering "a game changer."

What a waste of \$5.5 million! Anyone who had read John Hersey's *Hiroshima* would have known about the blinding nature of the flash. Hersey describes what Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge, S.J. saw when, the day after the nuclear explosion, he went to fetch tap water outside Asano Park: "...twenty men...all in exactly the same nightmarish state: their faces wholly burned, their eye-sockets hollow, the fluid from their melted eyes had run down their cheeks." Readers of Hersey's book, first published in the *New Yorker* in 1946, would also know that taking shelter had not been a "game changer" for thousands in Hiroshima where houses, churches, hospitals and other buildings came tumbling down; some flew through the air when the whirlwind uprooted trees and tossed buildings and people in all directions. 220,000 people were killed immediately

or shortly thereafter in the bombings of Hiroshima (140,000) and Nagasaki (80,000). By 1950, an estimated 340,000 had died as a result of the only two atomic attacks in history.

It is bureaucratic madness to trust in "emergency management," "pre-event preparedness" and "citizen education," as if there might not be some kind of unpredictability about a nuclear explosion in the 21st century when nuclear weapons are a hundred times more potent than they were in 1945. There were 150 doctors in

Hiroshima. Sixty-five died immediately and most of the rest were wounded. Of the 1,780 nurses, 1,654 either died during the initial blast or were too badly hurt to work.

The basic thesis of the Obama administration's report is that the cold war created an "unrealistic sense of fatalism about a terrorist nuclear attack" and that, based on "recent scientific analyses," a nuclear detonation is "more survivable than most people think...potentially survivable for thousands, especially with adequate shelter and education."

Whether, under Obama in 2010 or Trump in 2017, we are being prepared psychologically to believe that we can win a nuclear exchange or simply being told what to do if we are the victims of a nuclear attack, the level of delusion is striking.

Peace is our only shelter.

In late 2002, in response to talk of an atomic terrorist attack, George W. Bush claimed that "History will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act." The same is true now. I hope that our action will eventually encompass much more than telling citizens that friends don't let friends drive during nuclear attacks and urging them to stay indoors, as if we were defending ourselves against a snow storm.

Our action must be to assemble all parties concerned and create a diplomatic solution to this urgent, global crisis. It will only be by sitting down at the table together that we will be able to ascertain just what North Korea's fears and aspirations might be and then how we might work together toward a lasting solution. It will also be essential to recall Thomas Merton's insightful advice in such matters: "The true solution to our problems is not accessible to any one isolated party or nation...All must arrive at it by working together."

One cannot take cover from a nuclear weapon. Only by abolishing them can we make sure that our children do not become their victims. Appropriately, Albert Camus' August 8, 1945 newspaper piece ends with these words: "Peace is the only combat worth waging. This is no longer a plea, but an order that must rise from the people to their governments, the order to choose once and for all between hell and reason."

Just as our Rocket Man was threatening North Korea's Rocket Man and North Korea's Rocket Man was threatening our Rocket Man, an order did rise from the people to their governments and the Norwegian Nobel Committee wisely awarded its 2017 Peace Prize to those who issued the order, ICAN, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

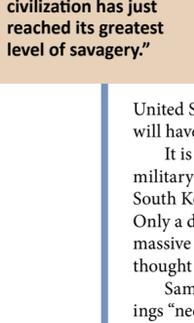
It is important to recall both that the 2009 Nobel Peace prize awarded to President Obama specifically cited his "promotion of nuclear nonproliferation" and that, tragically, in March 2016, Obama committed to a trillion dollar nuclear weapons upgrade. Not surprisingly, President Trump has seized the opportunity to begin the upgrade and there are reports, recently denied, that he has also called for an additional nuclear buildup.

Based in Geneva, ICAN is a coalition of disarmament activists in non-governmental organizations in roughly 100 countries that has campaigned for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons which 122 countries (two-thirds of UN members) adopted at the UN in July.

Although all nine nuclear powers (North Korea, United States, China, Russia, France, England, Israel, Pakistan, India) boycotted the vote and denounced the ban, the treaty will become international law as soon as 50 nations ratify it. It will forbid all countries that signed it from making, using, or stockpiling nuclear weapons.

Critics say that the treaty is meaningless. However, to highlight the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons, to underscore the moral depravity in using these weapons, and to declare it unacceptable to threaten millions of people constitute positive steps.

It would be wonderful for the 122 countries who favor the abolition of nuclear weapons to leave the current UN, which is dominated by the nuclear states, and form a new UN open only to non-nuclear nations. This would help emphasize the stigma of possessing nuclear weapons and shame publicly the nine truly rogue nations who threaten all of us and all life on the planet. ✪



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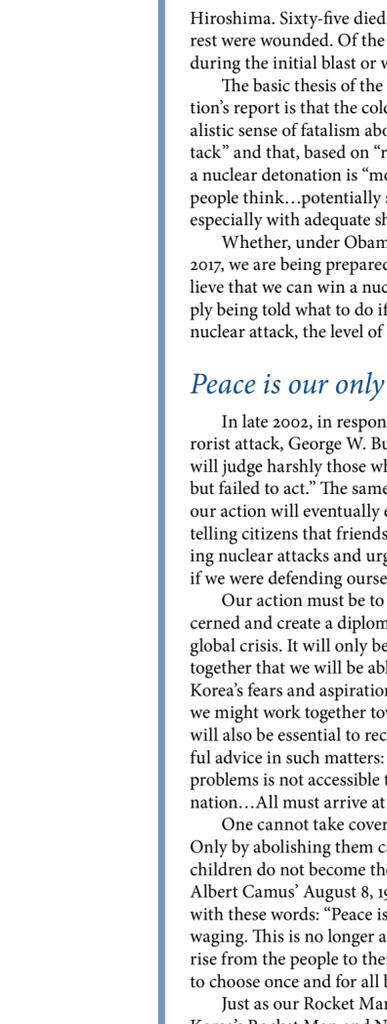
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ICAN, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, received the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for its role in advancing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The treaty has been signed by 122 nations.

¹ William J. Broad, "U.S. Rethinks Strategy for the Unthinkable," *New York Times*, December 15, 2010.

Swords and Plowshares

Trump, -Un and Nuclear War??

“So that you and your children will live.”
—Nuclear Freeze movement poster 1980s

Murray Polner

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war any more.”—Isaiah 2:4

In October 1962 a friend and I stood silently near the UN’s Isaiah Wall anxiously awaiting news of the Russian ships loaded with nukes heading for Castro’s Cuba. Two decades later we were still at it, our Cold War administrations and foreign policy elites urging us to prepare for a possible Russian nuclear attack. The US Postal Service faithfully complied when it announced plans to issue emergency change-of-address cards to its patrons, which presumably could prove useful after our power grids were destroyed by nuclear bombs along with our homes, neighborhoods, hospitals, schools, water and food suppliers—all turned to ashes. The US National Security, Presidential Review memorandum #19, June 1977, estimated to a distracted majority of Americans that 140,000,000 people would die if the US and Russia chose to fight it out with nukes. My hunch is that somewhere today in the bowels of an obscure federal agency or think tank, study estimates of deaths are more up to date and even greater in number, especially in East Asia and the Middle East. I imagine that such revised guesstimates now take into account the misery and unrelieved suffering that will follow nuclear war with men, women and children screaming to be killed to relieve their suffering, a snapshot of civilizations approaching their end.

We also told school kids to hide under their desks after the sirens went off and that apartment houses need to set aside their basements as bomb shelters. We were reassured by a State Department consultant’s article in 1980 in the journal *Foreign Policy* that a nuclear war could only kill about 20 million people, “a level compatible with survival and recovery.” And in 1982, Thomas K. Jones, Deputy Under Secretary for Strategic Nuclear Forces, told Robert Scheer of the *Los Angeles Times* we could survive a nuclear attack if we dug a hole and covered it with enough dirt. Meanwhile, the *Express* in Great Britain recently published an article, “How to survive a nuclear attack? What to do when a nuclear missile strikes”—yet another hawkish delusion by our overseas friends.

But more sophisticated and sure-fire techniques are apparently still needed. The *New Yorker* ran a piece about how some of our ultra-rich are building what they hope will be nuke-resistant homes very very far from urban enemy targets. Their assumption seems to be that after LA, Seattle, Miami, Washington, Chicago and New York lay in ruins they will still be alive, their kids still catching school buses and their commuter trains on time—a living testimony to Trump’s fictional Great America.

And so our never-ending wars continue—years after year, decade after decade. I’ve been absorbed by the Ken Burns-Lynn Novick epic TV documentary, *The Vietnam War*, which details our criminal adventure against South East Asians and the American cannon fodder about whom I wrote in 1971:

“Never before in American history have as many loyal and brave young men been as shabbily treated by the government that sent them to war, never before have so many of them questioned as much...the essential rightness of what they were forced to do.”—Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971)

And now it’s time for Kim Jong-un and his feral twin Donald Trump, two allegedly tough guys threatening millions of us, sounding much like end-times lunacy. Our doves and middle

of the readers are silent, forgetting that “Silence,” as Dr. King rightly warned us decades ago, “was betrayal.”

Watching the Burns-Novick film, I think of Bao Ninh, once a 17-year-old North Vietnamese combat soldier and later novelist (*The Sorrow of War*) who says of the killing he experienced: “Only a stone would not be terrified”—though the majority of Americans, non-combatants, supported the war to the very end while allowing other parents’ sons and daughters to be sacrificed for a cause few appreciated or understood.

Among the few US survivors of Vietnam’s Hill 825, some soldier in the documentary eerily echoes the remaining troops at WWI’s bloody Battle of the Somme when so many on both sides died for a few pieces of worthless land, saying, “we accomplished nothing” even while a majority of unquestioning and patriotic Americans circled the wagons and believed what their lying leaders told them.

In the film, LBJ listened to General Westmoreland’s endless requests for more and more troops, including growing numbers of draftees, and always seemed to ask, before giving way, “Where does it all end?” “In defeat,” Under Secretary of State George Ball once prophetically answered years earlier to LBJ and a deaf foreign policy elite audience eager to save Southeast Asia from communism.

Back in October 1962 my friend and I stood at the Isaiah Wall, obviously relieved when a radio report announced that the Russian ships had turned back, a diplomatic solution apparently reached. Still, it left us with no real protection against a future nuclear war save our national fantasy of being indestructible. As we left, I turned to my friend and recited Isaiah’s subversive aphorism about beating swords into plowshares. ✧



Bomb shelters have become popular once again, now as chic security for the rich. This model from Radius Engineering was pictured in a recent *Popular Mechanics* feature. Radius’s biggest selling shelter goes for \$320,000, while their deluxe Earthcom Dome sells for \$420,000. See Joe P. Hasler, “6 Safe, Strong—and Chic—Bomb Shelters You Can Buy Now.” *Popular Mechanics*. 11 Aug. 2017. Web.

MURRAY-POLNER is SHALOM’s co-editor.



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A Prolonged Tour of Hypocrisy

Worth Dying For?

When It Comes to the War in the Greater Middle East, Maybe We're the Bad Guys

Danny Sjursen

“Why do they hate us?” Americans have asked, with evident disbelief, for much of this century. Either we’re not paying attention or we’re true believers.

I used to command soldiers. Over the years, lots of them actually. In Iraq, Colorado, Afghanistan, and Kansas. And I’m still fixated on a few of them like this one private first class (PFC) in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2011. All of 18, he was short, scrawny, and popular. Nine months after graduating from high school, he’d found himself chasing the Taliban with the rest of our gang. At five foot nothing, I once saw him step into an irrigation canal and disappear from sight—all but the two-foot antenna on his radio. In my daydreams, I always see the same scene, the moment his filthy, grizzled baby face reappeared above that ditch, a cigarette still dangling loosely from his lips. His name was Anderson and I can remember thinking at that moment: What will I tell his mother if he gets killed out here?

And then... poof...it’s 2017 again and I’m here in Kansas, pushing papers at Fort Leavenworth, those days in the field long gone. Anderson himself survived his tour of duty in Afghanistan, though I’ve no idea where he is today. A better commander might. Several of his buddies were less fortunate. They died, or found themselves short a limb or two, or emotionally and morally scarred for life.

From time to time I can’t help thinking of Anderson, and others like him, alive and dead. In fact, I wear two bracelets on my wrist engraved with the names of the young men who died under my command in Afghanistan and Iraq, six names in all. When I find a moment, I need to add another. It wasn’t too long ago that one of my soldiers took his own life. Sometimes the war doesn’t kill you until years later.

And of this much I’m certain: the moment our nation puts any PFC Anderson in harm’s way, thousands of miles and light years from Kansas, there had better be a damn good reason for it, a vital, tangible national interest at stake. At the very least, this country better be on the right side of the conflicts we’re fighting.

The Wrong Side

It’s long been an article of faith here: The United States is the greatest force for good in the world, the planet’s “indispensable nation.” But what if we’re wrong? After all, as far as I can tell, the view from the Arab or African “street” tells a different story altogether. Americans tend to loathe the judgments of foreigners, but sober strategy demands that once in a while we walk the proverbial mile in the global shoes of others. After all, almost 16 years into the war on terror it should be apparent that something isn’t working. Perhaps it’s time to ask whether the United States is really playing the role of the positive protagonist in a great global drama.

I know what you’re thinking: ISIS, the Islamic State, is a truly awful outfit. And so it is and the U.S. is indeed combatting it, though various allies and even adversaries (think: Iran) are doing most of the fighting. Still, with the broader war for the Greater Middle East in mind, wouldn’t it be appropriate to stop for a moment and ask: Just whose side is America really on?

Certainly, it’s not the side of the average Arab. That should be apparent. Take a good, hard look at the region and it’s obvious that Washington mainly supports the interests of Israel, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Egypt’s military dictator, and various Gulf State autocracies. Or consider the actions and statements of the Trump administration and of the two administrations that preceded it and here’s what seems obvious: The United States is in many ways little more than an air force, military trainer, and weapons depot for assorted Sunni despots. Now, that’s not a point made too often—not in this context anyway—because it’s neither a comfortable thought for most Americans, nor a particularly convenient reality for establishment policymakers to broadcast, but it’s the truth.

Yes, we do fight ISIS, but it’s hardly that simple. Saudi Arabia, our main regional ally, may portray itself as the leader of a “moderate Sunni block” when it comes to both Iran and terrorism, but the reality is, at best, far grayer than that. The Saudis—with whom President Trump announced a \$110 billion arms deal during the first stop on his inaugural foreign trip back in May—have spent the last few decades spreading their intolerant brand of Islam across the region. In the process, they’ve also supported al-Qaeda-linked groups in Syria.

Maybe you’re willing to argue that al-Qaeda down those towers in New York. While President Trump enjoyed a traditional sword dance with the Saudi hosts—no doubt gratifying his martial tastes—the air forces of the Saudis and their Gulf state allies were bombing and missing Yemeni civilians into the grimmest of situations, including a massive famine and a spreading cholera epidemic amid the ruins of their impoverished country. So much for the disastrous two-year Saudi war there, which goes by the grimly ironic moniker of Operation Restoring Hope and for which the US military provides midair refueling and advanced munitions, as well as intelligence.

If you’re a human rights enthusiast, it’s also worth asking just what kind of states we’re working with here. In Saudi Arabia, women can’t drive automobiles, “sorcery” is a capital offense, and people are beheaded in public. Hooray for American values! And newsflash: Iran’s leaders—whom the Trump administration and its generals are obsessed with demonizing—may be no angels, but the Islamic republic they preside over is a far more democratic country than Saudi Arabia’s absolute monarchy. Imagine Louis XIV in a kufiyah and you’ve just about nailed the nature of Saudi rule.

After Israel, Egypt is the number two recipient of direct U.S. military aid, to the tune of \$1.3 billion annually. And that bedrock of liberal values is led by U.S.-trained General Abdul el-Sisi, a strongman who seized power in a coup and then, just for good measure, had his army gun down a crowd demonstrating in favor of the deposed democratically elected president. And how did the American beacon of hope respond? Well, Sisi’s still in power; the Egyptian military is once again receiving aid from the Pentagon; and, in April, President Trump paraded the general around the White House, assuring reporters, “in case there was any doubt, that we are very much behind President el-Sisi. ... he’s done a fantastic job!”

In Syria and Iraq, the U.S. military is fighting a loathsome adversary in ISIS, but even so, the situation is far more complicated than usually imagined here. As a start, the U.S. air offensive to support allied Syrian and Kurdish rebels fighting to take ISIS’s “capital,” Raqqa—grimly titled Operation Wrath of the Euphrates—killed more civilians this past May and June than the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. In addition, America’s brutal air campaign appears unhinged from any coherent long-term strategy. No one in charge seems to have the faintest clue what exactly will follow ISIS’s rule in eastern Syria. A Kurdish mini-state? A three-way civil war between Kurds, Sunni tribes, and Assad’s forces (with Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s increasingly autocratic Turkey as the wild card in the situation)? Which begs the question: Are American bombs actually helping?

Similarly, in Iraq it’s not clear that the future rule of Shia-dominated militia groups and others in the rubble left by the last years of grim battle in areas ISIS previously controlled will actually prove measurably superior to the nightmare that preceded them. The present Shia-dominated government might even slip back into the sectarian chauvinism that helped empower ISIS in the first place. That way, the U.S. can fight its fourth war in Iraq since 1991!

And keep in mind that the war for the Greater Middle East—and I fought in it myself both in Iraq and Afghanistan—is just the latest venture in the depressing annals of Washington’s geo-strategic thinking since President Ronald Reagan’s administration, along with the Saudis and Pakistanis, armed, funded, and supported extreme fundamentalist Afghan mujahedeen rebels in a Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union that eventually led to the 9/11 attacks. His administration also threw money, guns, and training—sometimes illegally—at the brutal Nicaraguan Contras in another Cold War covert conflict in which about 100,000 civilians died.

In those years, the United States also stood by apartheid South Africa—long after the rest of the world shunned that racist state—not even removing Nelson Mandela’s name from its terrorist watch list until 2008! And don’t forget Washington’s support for Jonas Savimbi’s National Movement for the Total Independence of Angola that would contribute to the death of some 500,000 Angolans. And that’s just to begin a list that would roll on and on.

That, of course, is the relatively distant past, but the history of U.S. military action in the twenty-first century suggests that Washington seems destined to repeat the process of choosing the wrong, or one of the wrong, sides into the foreseeable future. Today’s Middle East is but a single exhibit in a prolonged tour of hypocrisy.

Boundless Hypocrisy

Maybe it’s because most Americans just aren’t paying attention or maybe we’re a nation of true believers, but it’s clear that most of us still cling to the idea that our country is a beacon of hope for the planet. Never known for our collective self-awareness, we’re eternally aghast to discover that so many elsewhere find little but insincerity in the promise of U.S. foreign policy. “Why do they hate us?” Americans have asked, with evident disbelief, for much of this century. Here are just a few hints related to the Greater Middle East:

*Post-9/11, the United States unleashed chaos in the region, destabilized it in stunning ways, and via an invasion launched on false premises created the conditions for ISIS’s rise. (That terror group quite literally formed in an American prison in post-invasion Iraq.) Later, with failing or failed states dotting the region, the U.S. has been to the worst refugee crisis since World War II has been to admit—to choose but a single devastated country—a paltry 18,000 Syrians since 2011. Canada took in three times that number last year; Sweden more than 50,000 in 2015 alone; and Turkey hosts 3 million displaced Syrians.

*Meanwhile, Donald Trump’s attempts to put in place a Muslim travel ban haven’t won this country any friends in the region either; nor will the president’s—or White House aide Stephen Miller’s—proposed “reform” of U.S. immigration policy, which would prioritize English-speakers, cut in half legal migration within a decade, and limit the ability of citizens and legal residents to sponsor relatives. How do you think that’s going to play in the

global war that’s heirs and minds? As much as Miller would love to change Emma Lazarus’s inscription on the Statue of Liberty to “give me your well-educated, your highly skilled, your English-speaking masses yearning to be free,” won’t on one thing: world opinion won’t miss the duplicity and hypocrisy of such an approach.

*Guantánamo—recruiting the single best Islamist-perpetrating tool on Earth—is still open. And, says President Trump, we’re “keeping it open... and we’re gonna load it up with some bad dudes, believe me, we’re gonna load it up.” On this, he’s likely to be a man of his word. A new executive order is expected soon, preparing the way for an expansion of that prison’s population, while the Pentagon is already planning to put almost half a billion dollars into the construction of new facilities there in the coming years. No matter how upset the world gets at

any of this, no matter how ISIS and other terror groups use it for their brand of advertising, no American officials will be held to account, because the United States is not a signatory to the International Criminal Court. Hypocritical? Nope, just utterly all-American.

*And speaking of prisons, thanks to nearly unqualified—sometimes almost irrational—U.S. support for Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank increasingly resemble walled off penal complexes. You almost have to admire President Trump for not even pretending to play the honest broker in the never-ending Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He typically told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, “One state, two state... I like whichever you like.” The safe money says Netanyahu will choose neither, opting instead to keep the Palestinians in political limbo without civil rights or a sovereign state, while Israel embarks on a settlement bonanza in the occupied territories. And speaking of American exceptionalism, we’re almost alone on the world stage when it comes to our support for the Israeli occupation.

The Cost

Given the nature of contemporary American war-fighting (far away and generally lightly covered by the media, which has an endless stream of Trump tweets to fawn over), it’s easy to forget that American troops are still dying in modest numbers in the Greater Middle East, in Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and—almost 16 years after the American invasion of that country—Afghanistan.

As for myself, from time to time (too often for comfort) I can’t help thinking of PFC Anderson and those I led who were so much less fortunate than him: Rios, Hensley, Clark, Hockenberry (a triple amputee), Fuller, Balsley, and Smith. Sometimes, when I can bear it, I even think about the war’s countless Afghan victims. And then I wish I could truly believe that we were indisputably the “good guys” in our unending wars across the Greater Middle East because that’s what we owed those soldiers.

And it pains me no less that Americans tend to blindly venerate the PFC Andersons of our world, to put them on such a pedestal (as the president did in his Afghan address to the nation recently), offering them eternal thanks, and so making them and their heroism the reason for fighting on, while most of the rest of us don’t waste a moment thinking about what (and whom) they’re truly fighting for.

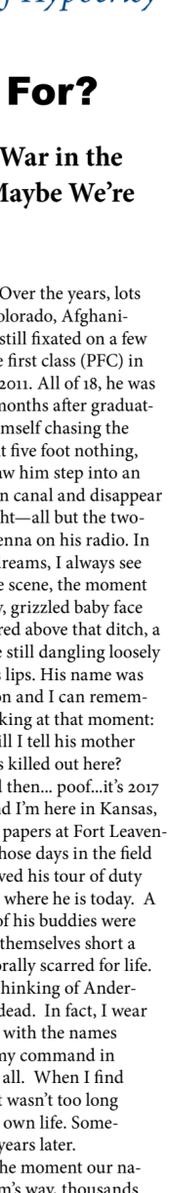
If ever you have the urge to do just that, ask yourself the following question: Would I be able to confidently explain to someone’s mother what (besides his mates) her child actually died for?

What would you tell her? That he (or she) died to ensure Saudi hegemony in the Persian Gulf, or to facilitate the rise of ISIS, or an eternal Guantánamo, or the spread of terror groups, or the creation of yet more refugees for us to fear, or the further bombing of Yemen to ensure a famine of epic proportions?

Maybe you could do that, but I couldn’t and can’t. Not anymore, anyway. There have already been too many mothers, too many widows, for whom those explanations couldn’t be lamer. And so many dead—American, Afghan, Iraqi, and all the rest that eventually I find myself sitting on a bar stool staring at the six names on those bracelets of mine, the wreckage of two wars reflecting back at me, knowing I’ll never be able to articulate a coherent explanation for their loved ones, should I ever have the courage to try.

Fear, guilt, embarrassment...my crosses to bear, as the war Anderson and I fought only expands further and undoubtedly more disastrously. My choices, my shame. No excuses.

Here’s the truth of it, if you just stop to think about America’s wars for a moment: it’s only going to get harder to look a widow or mother in the eye and justify them in the years to come. Maybe a good soldier doesn’t bother to worry about that...but I now know one thing at least: I’m not that.



Imagine Louis XIV in a kufiyah and you’ve just about nailed the nature of Saudi rule.



U.S.-trained Field Marshall Abdul el-Sisi, President of Egypt, a strongman who seized power in a coup and had his army gun down a crowd demonstrating in favor of the deposed democratically elected president. He is still in power. In April, President Trump said, “we are very much behind President el-Sisi”

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[Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author, expressed in an unofficial capacity, and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.]

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