

Acknowledging the Cost of War: “Incalculable”

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Recent polls suggest that while a majority of U.S. people disapprove of the war in Afghanistan, many on grounds of its horrible economic cost, only 3% took the war into account when voting in the 2010 midterm elections. The issue of the economy weighed heavily on voters, but the war and its cost, though clear to them and clearly related to the economy in their thinking, was a far less pressing concern.

U.S. people, if they do read or hear of it, may be shocked at the apparent unconcern of the crews of two U.S. helicopter gunships, which attacked and killed nine children on a mountainside in Afghanistan’s Kunar province, shooting them “one after another” this past Tuesday March 1st. (“The helicopters hovered over us, scanned us and we saw a green flash from the helicopters. Then they flew back high up, and in a second round they hovered over us and started shooting.” (NYT 3/2/11)).

Four of the boys were seven years old; three were eight, one was nine and the oldest was twelve. “The children were gathering wood under a tree in the mountains near a village in the district,” said Noorullah Noori, a member of the local development council in Manogai district. “I myself was involved in the burial,” Noori said. “Yesterday we buried them.” (AP, March 2, 2011) General Petraeus has acknowledged, and apologized for, the tragedy.

He has had many tragedies to apologize for just counting Kunar province alone. Last August 26th, in the Manogai district, Afghan authorities accused international forces of killing six children during an air assault on Taliban positions. Provincial police chief Khalilullah Ziayee said a group of children were collecting scrap metal on the mountain when NATO aircraft dropped bombs to disperse Taliban fighters attacking a nearby base. “In the bombardment six children, aged six to 12, were killed,” the police commander said. “Another child was injured.”

In the Bamiyan province of Afghanistan, Zekirullah, a young Afghan friend of mine, age 15, rises at 2:00 a.m. several mornings each week and rides his donkey for six hours through the pre-dawn to reach a mountainside where he can collect scrub brush and twigs which he loads on the donkey in baskets. Then he heads home and stacks the wood - on top of his family’s home - to be taken down later and burned for heat. They don’t have electrical appliances to heat the home, and even if they did the villagers only get electricity for two hours a day, generally between 1:00 a.m. - 3:00 a.m. Families rely on their children to collect fuel for heat during the harsh winters and for cooking year round. Young laborers, wanting to help their families survive, mean no harm to the United States. They’re not surging at us, or anywhere: they’re not insurgents. They’re not doing anything to threaten us. They are children, and children anywhere are like children everywhere: they’re children like our own.

Sadly, more and more of us in America are getting used to the idea of child poverty – and even child labor – as our own economy sinks further under the burden of our latest nine years of war, of two billion dollars per week we spend creating poverty abroad that we can then emulate at home. Things are getting bad here, but in Afghanistan, children are bombed. Their bodies are casually dismembered and strewn by machines already lost in the horizon as the limbs settle. They lie in pools of blood until family members realize, one by one, that their children are not late in returning home but in fact never will.

In October and again in December of 2010, our small delegation of Voices for Creative Nonviolence activists met with a large family living in a wretched refugee camp. They had fled their homes in the San Gin district of the Helmand Province after a drone attack killed a mother there and her five children. The woman’s husband showed us photos of his children’s bloodied corpses. His niece, Juma Gul, age 9, had survived the attack. She and I huddled next to each other inside a hut made of mud on a chilly December morning. Juma Gul’s father stooped in front of us and gently unzipped her jacket, showing me that his daughter’s arm had been amputated by shrapnel when the U.S. missile hit their home in San Gin.

Next to Juma Gul was her brother, whose leg had been mangled in the attack. He apparently has no access to adequate medical care and experiences constant pain. The pilot of the attacking drone, perhaps controlling it from as far away as Creech Air Force Base here in the United States, knows nothing of this family or of the pain that he or she helped inflict. Nor do the commanders, the people who set up the base, the people who pay for it with their taxes, and the people who persist in electing candidates intent on indefinitely prolonging the war.

But sometimes the war is like it was this past Tuesday March 1st. Sometimes the issue is right in front of us – as it was to those helicopter crews – it’s up close so there can be no mistake as to what we are doing. According to the election polls we see the cost of war, dimly, but, as with the helicopter crews, it doesn’t affect – or prevent – our decisions. Afterwards we deplore the tragedy; we make a pretense of acknowledging the cost of war, but it is incalculable. We can’t hope to count it. We actually, finally, have to stop making people like the nine children who died on March 1st, pay it.

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