

Fort Bragg: Meeting at the End of the World. The US Military In Crisis. “Recent Covid Period worsened all these Problems”

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Global Research, December 27, 2023

Region: [USA](#)
Theme: [History](#)

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Dying throes of U.S. militarism, with post-covid trauma and malaise, display themselves in Fayetteville, North Carolina this December as I travel there on a Friday for a Saturday meeting.

Fort Bragg is there, which is one of the largest military bases in the world. My meeting is with a group I volunteer with that counsels military members and veterans, takes calls from those who need help, and directs them to services.

In the past few years, the U.S. military has [failed to meet its recruitment goals](#), according to U.S. news outlets. International outlets, like [Al Jazeera](#), also report on the shortages. Young people’s poor mental and physical health, learning losses, and lack of confidence in the U.S. government and the military have all been blamed for lagging recruitment. The recent Covid period worsened all these problems.

Current service members [suffer heart problems](#) after receiving mandated Covid shots, and over 8000 service members were discharged for declining the shots, with members losing benefits and promotion opportunities. War rages in Israel and Palestine, and [U.S. warships recently fired on drones](#) that attacked commercial ships in the Red Sea. The military [has sent thousands of U.S. troops to the Middle East](#) while attacks on soldiers in Iraq and Syria increase.

Because my father was career military, my family lived at Ft. Bragg when I was a child, and my father left from there for his first deployment to the Vietnam War. The base was recently renamed Fort Liberty. Gleaming chains stores line the main road into town – I Hop, Panera, Ross, every imaginable fast-food place, and some I have never heard of like Cinnaholic, all brightly lit and crowded. Consumerism and consumption look like signs of prosperity, but here, now, they seem to have reached an unsustainable critical mass.

Signs of despair and struggle are everywhere along with a sweet vulnerability also circulating among common people as though we tremble at the edge of the world, the edge of doom when being kind to each other, making some kind of connection seems more important than ever.

“Is it nice enough?” I ask the lady at the counter when I check into the Comfort Inn on Friday night. “I’m tired after a long drive.”

“It is,” she answers tenderly. When I ask her where a good place to eat is, she asks me what I like and when I tell her a few choices, she walks out the door of the hotel beside me, with extraordinary politeness, to point out Mission BBQ a few store fronts down, close enough for me to walk.

Cars, muscular trucks, and gleaming motorcycles roar through the main drag that is eight-lanes wide. Occasionally, a driver accelerates an engine with a ferocious sound and burst of speed. You can almost smell the testosterone. I often wonder: does the U.S. public really understand what we ask military people, mostly men, to do when we train them for wars and send them to wars? What do people think actually happens there? Military patches, photos, tools, and mementos fill the walls of the Mission BBQ restaurant where I eat.

A large print of the [U.S. Army’s Soldier’s Creed](#) hangs prominently in the main dining room. Prints of soldiers returning from war, kissing girls, are displayed in the women’s bathroom.

The girl bussing tables asks me what I am reading. She tells me she likes to read, that she read a lot when she lived in England, growing up in a military family.

“Joan Didion,” I tell her and show her the cover of the book of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. I read it in my twenties and am re-reading it now. My copy is yellowed and brittle. She thanks me, says she’ll check it out. The restaurant is full of young men, amazingly fit, plus a few young families. At the table next to me is a huge, beautiful man with tattoos all over his arms and neck. It looks like he is with his wife, mother, and toddler son.

On my walk back to the hotel, I see a smoke shop and am curious as I have never been in one before. Students in public schools where I have taught sneak vape pipes in bathrooms and get in trouble when detectors identify them. When I was in high school, we smoked cigarettes outside and some sneaked marijuana, but I didn’t like it. I wanted to see what the shop was like. They are everywhere now - neon and bright, full of colorful, varied products, rows of boxes and bottles, lines of vials and packages, candles, incense and fragrance oils. I puzzled how populations in the U.S. were so easily subdued by government Covid lockdowns in 2020 and beyond. Maybe shops like this one - and video games — were part of the answer. People stayed home, smoked, drank (liquor stores were never closed), played MMOGs, waited for Amazon boxes to appear on their porches.

I tell him I am a teacher, plus a writer and put on my reporter’s role, ask questions of the 23-year-old young man working there. He kindly answers. The store sells CBD or nicotine for vape pipes and a special kind of strong tobacco for the hookah pipes, also sold there.

In many states, marijuana is fully legal now. A steady stream of customers arrives, buying rolling papers for marijuana, another buying a vape pipe, which are rechargeable in all kinds of styles. The shop also sells disposal pipes to ingest psychedelic mushrooms. The young

shop worker grew up in military family, he says, and recounted the many places he had lived. He joined the military at 17, was in for four years, stationed a few places, including Fort Bragg, and then got out. He's now divorced at 23.

"I am leaving here as soon as I can," he says.

I walk back to the hotel. Discarded shopping carts with trash and old clothes litter spaces between bushes. A homeless person rests beside her shopping cart, filled with clothes and bedding. Parking lots are strewn with trash. I look in the hotel lobby for hot tea.

"We don't have fresh right now," says the young black guy seated, half sleeping, in the lobby. I ask him if there's a place I could walk to for a hot chocolate or tea.

"There's a Dunkin Donuts," he says. He steps out of the hotel with me and points. He's wearing a security uniform. He says he'll walk with me, that he's trying to wake up for his night shift at the hotel. I ask him if he is working security after military service. He says he was in the Marines and was shot in the leg and got out on a medical discharge and now works security at the hotel. I ask him if he likes it.

"It's quiet and not that hard," he says. He is young, yet his face has a tremor. Old railroad tracks run beside the road. I tell the young man I lived at Fort Bragg when I was a child, that my father left for Vietnam from there.

"It's a lot different since then, I'm sure," he says. "Now they call it Fort Liberty. I don't know why they did that. It doesn't seem to matter. They're just trying to be showy or something."

Dozens of obscenely bright stores shine in the night as we walk to Dunkin Donuts. Christmas lights blink and flash. I see more trash tangled in bushes and strewn on sidewalks; cigarette butts, plastic cups, and Styrofoam containers litter parking lots.

When I get back to the hotel room, the colors from the high-definition TV in my room are even brighter than the world outside; shapes and figures are hyper-real, extremely defined, almost grotesque in their clarity. There is a ridiculous game show on. I don't see high-definition TV at home, so hotel TVs easily entrance and shock me. When I watch too long, a sick feeling of the decline of Western civilization overtakes me. The show, *Raid the Cage*, is on a major network this Friday night, the network with the stylized eye ball I remember from childhood. How different TV is now.

Ghoulishly grinning, jumping, and cheering couples take turns running and grabbing purses, electronics, designer perfumes, jewelry, even kayaks from an enclosure and then carry the items out before a buzzer ends the round. The man or woman goes into the enclosure while the other one cheers and jumps. The person may even push a four-wheeler or a car out. I have the sound off, watching this scene unfold, this American decadence and consumerism with garish lights, neon flashing, and bells ringing on the set. I think couples may have had to compete in other games to qualify to "raid the cage."

"Rebuild the world," says a Lego toy advertisement with insanely detailed computer animation. Holiday Coke ads glitter with snows and Santas and computer stardust. Has TV become more hyper real after Covid nightmares, after wars in Ukraine and Palestine? Do advertisers want us in there - inside the screens - rather than in the world?

Pharmaceutical companies occupy airwaves. Fat people dance in a town square in an ad for

pills to lower blood sugar. Another ad proclaims that a cartoon guy will deliver a colon test to your doorstep in a box. Drug ads for eczema, chrone's disease, and all kinds of ailments fill the screen. Rich people in glittering rooms with tinsel and gold and greenery slowly eat Lindor chocolates. Pfizer advertises vaccines for pregnant women. On another network, a show called *The Great Christmas Light Fight* appears.

There is too much here. My eyes and heart hurt from the excess. My meeting is tomorrow.

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This article was originally published on Brownstone Institute.

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