The Illusion of War Without Casualties

America's wars in the post-9/11 era have been characterized by relatively low U.S. casualties, but that does not mean that they are any less violent than previous wars, Nicolas J.S. Davies observes.

By Nicolas J. S. Davies
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Featured image: Coffins of dead U.S. soldiers arriving at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware in 2006. (U.S. government photo)

Last Sunday's Oscar Awards were interrupted by an [incongruous propaganda exercise](#) featuring a Native American actor and Vietnam vet, featuring a montage of clips from Hollywood war movies.

The actor, **Wes Studi**, said that he "fought for freedom" in Vietnam. But anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of that war, including for instance the millions of viewers who watched Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's Vietnam War documentary, knows that it was the Vietnamese who were fighting for freedom – while Studi and his comrades were fighting, killing and dying, often bravely and for misguided reasons, to deny the people of Vietnam that freedom.

Studi introduced the Hollywood movies he was showcasing, including "American Sniper," "The Hurt Locker" and "Zero Dark Thirty," with the words,

> "Let's take a moment to pay tribute to these powerful films that shine a great spotlight on those who have fought for freedom around the world."

To pretend to a worldwide TV audience in 2018 that the U.S. war machine is "fighting for freedom" in the countries it attacks or invades was an absurdity that could only add insult to injury for millions of survivors of U.S. coups, invasions, bombing campaigns and hostile military occupations all over the world.

Wes Studi's role in this Orwellian presentation made it even more incongruous, as his own Cherokee people are themselves survivors of American ethnic cleansing and forced displacement on the Trail of Tears from North Carolina, where they had lived for hundreds or maybe thousands of years, to Oklahoma where Studi was born.

Unlike the delegates at the 2016 Democratic National Convention who broke out in chants of ["no more war"](#) at displays of militarism, the great and the good of Hollywood seemed nonplussed by this strange interlude. Few of them applauded it, but none protested either.

From Dunkirk to Iraq and Syria

Perhaps the aging white men who still run the "Academy" were driven to this exhibition of militarism by the fact that two of the films nominated for Oscars were war movies. But they were both films about the U.K. in the early years of the Second World War – stories of British people resisting German aggression, not of Americans committing it.

Like most cinematic paeans to the U.K.'s "finest hour," both these films are rooted in Winston Churchill's own account of the Second World War and his role in it. Churchill was roundly sent packing by British voters in 1945, before the war was even over, as British troops and their families instead voted for the "land fit for heroes" promised by the Labour Party, a land where the rich would share the sacrifices of the poor, in peace as in war, with a National Health Service and social justice for all.

Churchill reportedly consoled his cabinet at its final meeting, telling them,

> "Never fear, gentlemen, history will be kind to us – for I shall write it."

And so he did, cementing his own place in history and drowning out more critical accounts of the U.K.'s role in the war by serious historians like **A.J.P. Taylor** in the U.K. and **D.F. Fleming** in the U.S.

If the Military Industrial Complex and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences are trying to connect these Churchillian epics with America's current wars, they should be careful what they wish for. Many people around the world need little prompting to identify the German Stukas and Heinkels bombing Dunkirk and London with the U.S. and allied F-16s bombing Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and the British troops huddled on the beach at Dunkirk with the destitute refugees stumbling ashore on Lesbos and Lampedusa.

Externalizing the Violence of War

In the past 16 years, the U.S. has invaded, occupied and dropped 200,000 bombs and missiles on seven countries, but it has lost only 6,939 American troops killed and 50,000 wounded in these wars. To put this in the context of U.S. military history, 58,000 U.S. troops were killed in Vietnam, 54,000 in Korea, 405,000 in the Second World War and 116,000 in the First World War.

But low U.S. casualties do not mean that our current wars are less violent than previous wars. Our post-2001 wars have probably killed between 2 and 5 million people. The use of massive aerial and artillery bombardment has reduced cities like Fallujah, Ramadi, Sirte, Kobane, Mosul and Raqqa to rubble, and our wars have plunged entire societies into endless violence and chaos.

At the start of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, President George W. Bush ordered the U.S. military to conduct a devastating aerial assault on Baghdad, known as "shock and awe." (Source: Consortiumnews)

But by bombing and firing from a distance with very powerful weapons, the U.S. has wreaked all this slaughter and destruction at an extraordinary low rate of U.S. casualties. The U.S.'s technological war-making has not reduced the violence and horror of war, but it has "externalized" it, at least temporarily.

But do these low casualty rates represent a kind of "new normal" that the U.S. can replicate whenever it attacks or invades other countries? Can it keep waging war around the world and remain so uniquely immune from the horrors it unleashes on others?

Or are the low U.S. casualty rates in these wars against relatively weak military forces and lightly armed resistance fighters giving Americans a false picture of war, one that is enthusiastically embellished by Hollywood and the corporate media?

Even when the U.S. was losing 900-1,000 troops killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan each year from 2004 to 2007, there was much more public debate and vocal opposition to war than there is now, but those were still historically very low casualty rates.

U.S. military leaders are more realistic than their civilian counterparts. General Dunford, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has told Congress that the U.S. plan for war on North Korea is for a [ground invasion of Korea](), effectively a Second Korean War. The Pentagon must have an estimate of the number of U.S. troops who are likely to be killed and wounded under its plan, and Americans should insist that it makes that estimate public before U.S. leaders decide to launch such a war.

The other country that the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia keep threatening to attack or invade is Iran. President Obama admitted from the outset that [Iran was the ultimate strategic target]() of the CIA's proxy war in Syria.

Israeli and Saudi leaders openly threaten war on Iran, but expect the U.S. to fight Iran on their behalf. American politicians play along with this dangerous game, which could get thousands of their constituents killed. This would flip the traditional U.S. doctrine of proxy war on its head, effectively turning the U.S. military into a proxy force fighting for the ill-

defined interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Iran is nearly 4 times the size of Iraq, with more than double its population. It has a 500,000 strong military and its decades of independence and isolation from the West have forced it to develop its own weapons industry, supplemented by some advanced Russian and Chinese weapons.

In an article about [the prospect of a U.S. war on Iran](#), U.S. Army **Major Danny Sjursen** dismissed American politicians' fears of Iran as "alarmism" and called his boss, **Defense Secretary Mattis**, "obsessed" with Iran. Sjursen believes that the "fiercely nationalistic" Iranians would mount a determined and effective resistance to foreign occupation, and concludes, "Make no mistake, U.S.military occupation of the Islamic Republic would make the occupation of Iraq, for once, actually look like the 'cakewalk' it was billed to be."

Is This America's "Phony War"?

Invading North Korea or Iran could make the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan look in hindsight like the German invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland must have looked to German troops on the Eastern front a few years later. Only 18,000 German troops were killed in the invasion of Czechoslovakia and 16,000 in the invasion of Poland. But the larger war that they led to killed 7 million Germans and wounded 7 million more.

After the deprivations of the First World War reduced Germany to a state of near starvation and drove the German Navy to mutiny, Adolf Hitler was determined, like America's leaders today, to maintain an illusion of peace and prosperity on the home front. The newly conquered people of the thousand-year Reich could suffer, but not Germans in the homeland.

Hitler succeeded in [maintaining the standard of living in Germany](#) at about its pre-war level for the first two years of the war, and even began cutting military spending in 1940 to boost the civilian economy. Germany only embraced a total war economy when its previously all-conquering forces hit a brick wall of resistance in the Soviet Union. Could Americans be living through a similar "phony war", one miscalculation away from a similar shock at the brutal reality of the wars we have unleashed on the world?

How would the American public react if far greater numbers of Americans were killed in Korea or Iran – or Venezuela? Or even in Syria if the U.S. and its allies follow through on their [plan to illegally occupy Syria](#) east of the Euphrates?

And where are our political leaders and jingoistic media leading us with their ever-escalating anti-Russian and anti-Chinese propaganda? How far will they take their [nuclear brinksmanship](#)? Would American politicians even know before it was too late if they crossed a point of no return in their dismantling of Cold War nuclear treaties and escalating tensions with Russia and China?

Obama's doctrine of covert and proxy war was a response to the public reaction to what were in fact historically low U.S. casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq. But Obama waged war on the quiet, [not war on the cheap](#). Under cover of his dovish image, he successfully minimized the public reaction to his escalation of the war in Afghanistan, his proxy wars in Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen, his global expansion of special operations and drone strikes and a massive bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria.

Syria, after six years of U.S.-manufactured war. (Source: VENEZUELAPHOTO: PRENSA LATINA | INTERNET@GRANMA.CU \SANA)

How many Americans know that the bombing campaign Obama launched in Iraq and Syria in 2014 has been the heaviest U.S. bombing campaign anywhere in the world since Vietnam? Over 105,000 bombs and missiles, as well as indiscriminate U.S., French and Iraqi rockets and artillery, have blasted thousands of homes in Mosul, Raqqa, Fallujah, Ramadi and dozens of smaller towns and villages. As well as killing thousands of Islamic State fighters, they have probably killed at least 100,000 civilians, a systematic war crime that has passed almost without comment in the Western media.

"...And It Is Late"

How will the American public react if Trump launches new wars against North Korea or Iran, and the U.S. casualty rate returns to a more historically "normal" level – maybe 10,000 Americans killed each year, as during the peak years of the American War in Vietnam, or even 100,000 per year, as in U.S. combat in the Second World War? Or what if one of our many wars finally escalates into a nuclear war, with a higher U.S. casualty rate than any previous war in our history?

In his classic 1994 book, *Century of War,* the late **Gabriel Kolko** presciently explained,

> "Those who argue that war and preparation for it is not necessary to capitalism's existence or prosperity miss the point entirely: it simply has not functioned in any other way in the past and there is nothing in the present to warrant the assumption that the coming decades will be any different…"

Kolko concluded,

> "But there are no easy solutions to the problems of irresponsible, deluded leaders and the classes they represent, or the hesitation of people to reverse the world's folly before they are themselves subjected to its grievous consequences. So much remains to be done – and it is late."

America's deluded leaders know nothing of diplomacy beyond bullying and brinksmanship. As they brainwash themselves and the public with the illusion of war without casualties, they will keep killing, destroying and risking our future until we stop them – or until they stop us and everything else.

The critical question today is whether the American public can muster the political will to pull our country back from the brink of an even greater military disaster than the ones we have already unleashed on millions of our neighbors.

The Globalization of War: America's "Long War" against Humanity

Michel Chossudovsky

The "globalization of war" is a hegemonic project. Major military and covert intelligence operations are being undertaken simultaneously in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia and the Far East. The U.S. military agenda combines both major theater operations as well as covert actions geared towards destabilizing sovereign states.

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