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The Wars Less Known

Yossarian tensed with alert astonishment when he heard Colonel Korn's concluding words. "What's that?" he exclaimed. "What have you and Colonel Cathcart got to do with my country? You're not the same."

"How can you separate us?" Colonel Korn inquired with ironical tranquility.

"That's right," Colonel Cathcart cried emphatically. "You're either for us or against us. There's no two ways about it."

"I'm afraid he's got you," added Colonel Korn. "You're either *for* us or against your country. It's as simple as that."

—Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*

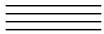
The world we live in—its divisions and conflicts, its widening gap between rich and poor, its seemingly inexplicable outbursts of violence—is shaped far less by what we celebrate and mythologize than by the painful events we try to forget.

—Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*

The wars of the United States have been showered with prose suggesting that they burst open not bodies, but history. War gives birth to new beginnings, the story goes, even moving the course of human events in positive, if also tragic,

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ways. Given this belief in war's grandeur and its tectonic role, what followed September 11, 2001, had to be declared another good war. And because most of its victims were homefront civilians, it was called a war like no other. But while the hijackers who heinously killed so many that day may have created a new kind of violent spectacle, they were not the authors of one of the human era's uniquely horrific events. For, I wearily note, we have been here before, and we have been led to forget. Today's war without end began long ago, and it has produced both the corpses of battle and economic and physical casualties in other arenas. Because you may not read this dark tale of two kinds of violence unless there is some small light to be had, the ending will suggest the sources of hope to which I cling.



I will begin with the unrecognized long war at home, and with an airplane flight I took just after New Year's Day 2002. As it turned out, I was assigned a place on the aisle in a large jet, with young men headed to the Marine's Parris Island training camp in every other seat around me. I was not surprised that it seemed to be the first flight for many, given the military's still heavy recruitment from the struggling classes. So there were some hysterical blurts of laughter, nervous comments, and macho posturing. One especially anxious young man, a boy really, retrieved his Bible and started to pray, but soon began retching violently into an airsickness bag. I asked his seat-mate if this was fear of flying, and he said, "I guess, ma'am, he's just sick about the plane and the boot camp all mixed together."

This boy-man had likely heard stories about the rituals of humiliation and physical trials that he would have to undergo at Parris Island. Though he knew that these promised to make a man of him, he could fear beatings and other, more elaborate physical hazing, and the psychological tortures of having his face smeared with lipstick and his neck strung with dead fish, mostly at the hands of his fellow soldiers. He would have signed on nonetheless because his recruiter and other devices of the annual two-billion-dollar budget devoted to military labor marketing had also promised he would enter the ranks of the super-citizen, the true patriot. And because it made military life look like a job-training program or a Dungeons and Dragons game as much or more than preparation for killing or being killed, that advertising promised safety. Oddly, this is something the military may in fact deliver. That is because the war they go to might be like most of the sixty-

six acknowledged U.S. foreign interventions since 1975 in relying on aerial bombardment to first “soften” their targets (often already made pliant by intense poverty). Training accident or friendly fire deaths aside, this has meant that a total of just 525 soldiers died in battle in the last two decades, a number equal to the U.S. highway death toll that accumulates in just five days. People walking into their first day of work at poultry processing plants speckled throughout the poor Carolina counties around their boot camp should vomit at the doorway, too. For they suffer higher rates of death and disability on the job than do soldiers.

Just a few days earlier, I had sensed nausea pulse through another arena of war as well, this in an NPR story about the controversy over U.S. treatment of the Camp X-Ray prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. Like the rest of the mainstream media, the station was paying devoted attention to a “national security intellectual” who was asked whether these prisoners were treated humanely and in accordance with international law governing POWs. The academic defended U.S. government actions, asserting that the camp was being governed, as she put it, by the “customs” if not the laws of warfare, such as the Geneva Convention. When asked what these customs were, she answered that they were simply practices that were in “good taste.”

The intellectual and the boy-man were both struggling with queasiness inside the machinery of war (though he was much closer to the gears than she). But its mechanisms have become increasingly invisible since at least the 1950s. It was in that early era of militarization that C. Wright Mills pointed out that the nation was coming to accept an all-encompassing “military definition of reality.” If we follow the young men to their destination, though, there are some routes around that wall of normalization of a gigantic army, and a world defined by the idea of threat.

They were headed to a place very like Fayetteville, North Carolina, a city of some 120,000 souls adjacent to the army’s Fort Bragg where I have conducted anthropological and historical research.¹ It is just one of the 1,324 major active-duty U.S. military bases and 3,660 such places, large and small, active duty and reserve, domestic and foreign. Like Fayetteville, many are places where pervasive child poverty, domestic violence, prostitution, environmental catastrophes large and small, and homelessness coexist with the nation’s massive state of war readiness. The situation in these towns constitutes a significant part of the U.S. way of life that the military is said to protect. And it does make such a world possible, if not in the sense usually

intended by that phrase: the army helps create the city's conditions of immiseration through the political economy that supports it, as I detail later in this essay. Only by magical thinking could one imagine how it could be otherwise: how having the most powerful military human history has ever seen could come without massive and disguised costs.

There are many more people like the recruits than the NPR commentator on the homefront of militarization, that is, many more people who can be considered the friendly fire casualties of war. These casualties include the people who make a poverty wage working retail jobs, the main type of work created by the post as soldiers go into town to buy burgers and fries, shower curtains, tattoos, or sneakers for their children. They include people who cannot find work at all given how many military spouses are added to the local labor pool when soldiers are brought to post, and those who are the victims of crimes committed by the resulting large number of desperate poor. They are the women beaten, stabbed, or shot by their partners, victims found in greater numbers around military posts where training in violence and male privilege are a stock in trade. They are the gay and lesbian people who are unreported hate crime targets, and who live with fewer health services given their more intense closeting in military communities.

Some of Fayetteville's poverty is not specific to a military city economy, but shared with that found across the United States. But the high national rates of poverty are also related, in a more complex way, to the military budget. One example of this relationship is found, paradoxically, in the military's generally excellent pay and benefits package, which includes universal family health care, subsidized housing, living wages, and social support systems. Military workers are then subtracted from the total forces that could otherwise be organized to demand such working conditions for all. In other words, the military creates a working class divided against itself, and contributes to the suggestion that the poor must pull themselves up by their bootstraps even as the leather they inherit rots away under their touch. In this way, the military budget helps create the tale of two cities found everywhere across the United States: misery pools of poverty and weather-beaten cottages on one side, and six-thousand-square-foot mansions dripping with commodities on the other, many of which house those who profit directly or indirectly from war.

To understand Fayetteville and the connections between its predicament and the economy of war, I have looked at its historical archive and spoken



A Tale of Two Houses, 2000. Photographs by elin o'Hara slavick.

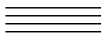
with its residents. Some are civilians and some soldiers, and many have penetrating insights into war and its effects. There is the challenge that one man described, even after he had spent several decades in the army, of reconciling the Ten Commandments with his military training. There are the many women who described being a kind of war refugee, leaving their hometown to avoid the overwhelming climate of objectification they lived with under the glare of the city's many strip bars and the young men who pursued them. And there are the new soldiers, the great majority of whom give college benefits as their primary reason for enlisting. The military offered what seemed beyond their reach in high school, where they were often "tracked" far below wealthier peers who did not have to exchange their freedom for college tuition. The stories I heard included those of homeless people, some one quarter of whom are veterans: one of their shelters was razed when the city decided to build a \$22.5 million military museum celebrating war and its heroes on its site.

Most people in the United States, including those now working in the military, have never seen battlefields. But one man's example demonstrates the importance of seeing the bodies of war, even if via media, and refusing the argument that it is in bad taste to show them. A Fort Bragg soldier who helped establish the city's Quaker House—a peace witness and draft counseling center—dates his awakening to the immorality of the war in Vietnam to one evening's television news. He was stunned to see, as he remembered it, "a big helicopter [with] a net under it, just full of bodies and they killed all these people that day and they said, 'Well now it's just a disposal problem, we have to get rid of these bodies.' And I don't know what they did, they buried them or burned or what they did. Just seeing something like that on TV, it's just like a click. You know this ain't right. No."

If most of us have not truly seen war, we nonetheless have lived with its haunting. Our lives have been made under the threat of nuclear Armageddon, and with the work of forgetting required by what has been done in our names in faraway places. This includes the destruction of Chilean democracy in 1973, collusion in the murder of labor organizers, priests, and nuns in Central America in the 1980s, and support for the Indonesian army and paramilitaries that ravaged the people of East Timor. In our name, Micronesian atolls and their people were irradiated by above-ground nuclear tests and an apartheid system was installed at Kwajalein atoll, which has been the target for missiles regularly launched from California's Vandenberg Air

Force Base to arch their way across the Pacific and into its cerulean lagoon. The dead and disappeared have haunted us because we are a war culture, our government massively involved in ordering the killing, training others to kill, and threatening to kill. We have been doubly haunted because we are a warrior culture without warriors: we have instead technicians of death, who shoot through the distancing grid of instrument panels or bureaucratic plans. We are a nation of sofa spectators who see war through that same grid, or through fiction movies or old war footage on the History Channel, the latter films long ago prescreened and approved for release by the Department of Defense or its more honestly named predecessor, the War Department. We have been doubly haunted, in other words, because after all of the killing, the bodies are hidden away and denied.

While we live with war as entertainment, we also pay war taxes to support the multibillion-dollar military budget. The only true war profiteers are the executives of corporations like Raytheon and General Electric whose “net earnings” are an order of magnitude larger than even the average corporation’s bloated skimming. Many in the working and middle classes get some small return on those taxes in the form of lower commodity prices that the violence ensures—fuel at bargain prices because the U.S. military keeps regimes like the Saudis’ in power in exchange for cheaper oil, imported clothes whose prices would be higher if the United States did not train and equip the militaries that repress labor organizing in countries where the clothing is made. But even these slim returns to U.S. citizens prove an illusion when assembly jobs have been exported from cities like Fayetteville and moved to these very countries to take advantage of the cheap labor ensured by U.S. military aid.



This brings us from the question of the long homefront to the long battlefront of history. The first problem in this transition from the inside to the outside of the nation and its history is the illusion created by nationalism. This is the notion that safety consists primarily in defending state borders and interests defined as a singular, people’s interest. These assumptions make it difficult to ask why the ubiquitous monuments to U.S. soldiers who have died in battle are not joined by others: to ask about the missing monuments to the dead of the Middle Passage, the fallen of the Industrial Revolution and its long cancerous tailwind, or the literally millions of deaths by

automobile. That is because it is assumed that the nation cannot kill its own people (no matter Yossarian's insight that war does exactly that). Is it also because we take for granted that these latter forms of carnage are mistakes, that only war is intentional if unwanted, and only it has shaped the nation?

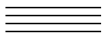
That said, it is important to ask about continuities between the current war and earlier ones. They begin with the racial hatred that has preceded, stoked, and been inflamed by nearly every one of the last centuries' wars. They run from the campaign against Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans in the United States to the genocides in Namibia, Nazi Germany, and Rwanda. In *War without Mercy*, John Dower powerfully highlighted how exterminationist methods on the battlefield and concentration camps at home were reserved for the Japanese in World War II, while the Germans were carefully separated into the good and bad among them, and how Japanese and German imperialism had racial charters as well.² Our current war likewise has been enmeshed in bigotry, including bin Laden's cry against the infidel. But it is the Afghani people who had to flee their homes, as the English did not when one of their own planted a bomb in his shoe and tried to murder a jet full of people. And the chief suspect in the anthrax terrorism that emptied the halls of Congress and killed six people is a military biological warfare specialist who works at Fort Detrick, Maryland. Not only do his superiors and neighbors need not worry that their training, tolerance, or mere proximity to him condemns them to punishment, but the suspect himself seems to be escaping with impunity.

Continuities of past wars with this present one are evident in the cold war, which was also advertised as a new and endless kind of clash. It was to be a war, it was said, where the enemy would no longer fight in the open, a war requiring the sacrifice of some freedom and principle. It would require vigilance against spies and collectivists at home as well as projection of armed might abroad. It, too, birthed a search for the enemy within and slaughter in places far away, and it, too, stole the fruits of our labor.

The cold war was also a war by and against terror—if by this we mean striking fear and horror into the hearts of a whole population by threatening to kill civilians and, occasionally, doing so for demonstration effect. These terrorists were found in the highest offices of the U.S. and Soviet governments where they planned atomic and proxy wars. They were called realists, however, and their long reign of nuclear terror—in which their two nations together targeted hundreds of millions of people in skyscrapers

and hovels—was called defense or even peace, and its architects men of honor. It is hardly surprising but still outrageous that the hardened missile silos, subterranean bunkers, nuclear submarines, and other infrastructure of atomic holocaust that still form part of our landscape remain misnamed. And so Henry Kissinger's assistants today can sift through his gilt-edged invitations to sip champagne in the parlors of power despite his faith in nuclear weapons and his hand in the terrors sown in Chile, Vietnam, and East Timor.³

The new war that George Bush wages can draw on the decades-long public relations campaign suggesting that the larger the U.S. arsenal, the safer we are. It can draw on the established idea that war elevates moral character in those who wage it and those who support it. It seems not to matter to their credibility that the elites now carrying out the war are entirely safe and that they have just emerged into their suited warrior roles from the board rooms of oil, construction, and military industrial corporations that stand to profit from the war. It seems also not to matter that the war's target has moved breathtakingly quickly from the planners of the September 11 attacks to a host of nations joined in a crazy quilt of antagonism, the Axis of Evil. What will be next we can only imagine, but it will surely be worthy of Joseph Heller.



What of hope, then? I have found it in dialogue and in history. Those encouraging conversations have been with people whose activism against the war I try to emulate, and those others who are trying to find their way to a moral stance toward the killing. Even those who repeat the phrase "We have to do something" seem almost always more thoughtful and less vengeful than the voices from the electronic boxes. From the days immediately after the attacks on New York and Washington, I have heard more people refuse the simplicities and the certainties of those who control the airwaves and whose framing devices overwhelmingly ask when and where the United States will strike, not how exactly this method proposes to accomplish a safe future.

In the second week of last September, I attended a class as a guest speaker. The professor leading the class described to her students how angry she was at the hijacking perpetrators and asked people to say if they were as well. Many hands went up along with mine. When I asked the students why they

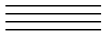
were mad, however, their multiple and nuanced reasons were not the instructor's. One was angry that the New York and Washington victims had not been protected despite a three-hundred-billion-dollar military budget, another that human beings continue to stoop to violence, another that her world had lost its security. While the Bush administration tried to reduce this all to a single feeling with one swift sword attached, these thoughtful, passionate varieties of anger then seemed to me openings to reflection and a response more ethical than indiscriminate force. They were ready to hear that the parallel to September 11, 2001, was not Pearl Harbor, because in 1941 it was a colonial outpost in a once-sovereign Hawaiian nation. They were ready to ask whether this was to be the opening salvo in a new round of worldwide violence like those that erupted in 1914, 1939, and 1947, and whether there was a way around the repetition of some of the foolish choices of the past. Even some of those who now have multiple U.S. flags pasted on or flying from their cars and homes and clothes mean simply to memorialize the dead, not face down enemies, foreign or domestic. But the symbol's danger is its muteness, which allows each flag to be gathered together by the administration and claimed as its own belligerent charter.

For years, people searching for alternatives to war have drawn some of their resolve and sustenance from history, as Howard Zinn and others have so eloquently motivated them to do. However familiar this history might be to some, it bears repeating as a litany of confidence in what is possible: from the success of Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent resistance movement in evicting the British Empire from India to the more than three hundred soldiers of the Israeli army who refused to fight in the occupied territories of Palestine as 2002 opened. It includes the vibrant antimilitarist tradition in the United States from the Quakers and Mennonites to that embodied in the Constitution. That document divides state power to make war-waging more difficult because its framers were deeply wary of standing armies, one of them, Samuel Adams, even warning, "It is a very improbable supposition that any people can long remain free, with a strong military power in the very heart of their country." The flame was carried by slavery's passive resisters, escapees, and abolitionists, by the campaign against universal military training and ROTC in the World War I era, and by the civil rights movement whose legions faced down the terror of the Ku Klux Klan with spiritual armor. It was in the massive rebellion against the Vietnam War that occurred within and outside the military, a rebellion that was linked with a call to end

the racism that promoted violence there and at home. And it includes the commitments of people like Philip Berrigan who has spent years in jail for standing in the path of U.S. weapons of mass destruction, and Dorothy Day's still-growing Catholic Worker movement, which births intentional communities dedicated to pacifism and justice.

The powerful antinuclear movement helped shrink the Soviet and U.S. nuclear arsenals and delegitimize their use, and mass-membership international human rights organizations were behind near-universal accord on conventions against land mines, chemical and biological weapons, state torture, and child soldiers. The International Criminal Court offers the possibility of trial and imprisonment for those who commit crimes against humanity. While the United States has often been alone in rejecting these treaties, or standing with the small group of nations it otherwise calls rogue states, these and many other alternatives have become available and are being used to delegitimize some of the most obscene forms of warfare. Hope is in the worldwide mass movement that has drawn attention to the victims of contemporary forms of economic violence. Finally, it came with the more than 100,000 people who marched on Washington, D.C., and San Francisco on April 20, calling for an end to the war on all its fronts.

When so much power is arrayed against the forces of life, it seems important to return to the places where war is planned and listen to the people who live in the shadow of that planning and closer to its costs. Their insights can still matter, especially while the discourse of democracy still holds some small sway and suggests that our views should guide what the state does. Human imagination and historical example suggest what safer and better world is possible.



The long homefront and its future fate hinge on our reconnecting both sides of the fence that separates the Fort Braggs and the Fayettevilles, seeing the links between our war taxes and the division of our house against itself, and forcing into juxtaposition the sites of carnage with the sites of good taste and euphemism. It hangs on seeing what is done in our name both at home and abroad, and on refusing the war planners, whether in the United States or Israel or Al-Qaeda. As we do so, we place the bodies and the mourners and the militarization-induced poverty where the realists must see them, and see us seeing them. Is it wrong to imagine the war's strategists and the

oil moguls stumbling over the dead, staining their fine clothes, on their way to a more humane, rehabilitative, and law-bound prison than the one established at Guantanamo Bay? Is it too difficult to see how the two kinds of public housing in Fayetteville—its barracks and its bantustans—are of a single piece? Can we take hope in the knowledge that—because we cannot have a gargantuan military without a hobbled homefront—we shall eliminate both problems simultaneously in the new world we struggle to make?

Notes

- 1 Catherine Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City and the American Twentieth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
- 2 John W. Dower, *War without Mercy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).
- 3 Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (London: Verso, 2001).