

The Courage To Combat Humiliation

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Paper presented at the 2010 Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict, Columbia University, New York, December 9-10, 2010

ABSTRACT: Despite, general perception, most U.S. citizens are not hawks. This lack of support for war is making U.S. leaders try to militarize public school students in the inner cities. Their military instructors are not likely to give them a well-rounded education or to inform them about the "total war" structure that has made civilians the main victims of warfare today. A small group of soldiers who have walked away from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been trying to convey information from their personal experiences through publications and public appearances. They are the ones who have had to directly confront and overcome humiliation for disobeying, not only laws, but, what takes even more courage, time-honored beliefs about the necessity for warfare, i.e. its integral connection to heroism, patriotism, purification and obedience (the last often seen as a virtue in itself). The present paper is a proposal for our organization, Studies in Dignity and Humiliation, to study ways to support the war resisters' efforts. I believe they may hold a key to unlocking the silence of the many Americans who are only like lemmings in one way: Both lemmings and U.S. citizens have been misunderstood.

I Despite general perception, most U.S. citizens are not hawks

The Lemmings Analogy: True—But Not What You Think

Lemmings. Everyone knows that lemmings are tiny, furry creatures biologically driven to commit suicide *en masse*. Thus, everyone immediately understands the metaphor: *Americans are lemmings*—as did, presumably, those persons responsible for the nearly 24, 000 hits I got from Google *search* this morning (50, 900 for *metaphor lemming*).

In fact, everyone is wrong. It seems that the little, long-haired rodents have as much desire to live out their lives in peace as most of us. The Walt Disney Studios' evocative image of lemmings leaping from cliff to ocean graves was staged. A Canadian Broadcasting Corporation documentary, *Cruel Camera*, showed the forced launching of lemmings off a cliff - evidence that did not, however, prevent the film, *White Wilderness*, from receiving an Academy Award for *Documentary Feature*. And so this piece of fiction lives on—and on. ♦

However, this paper is not about lemmings *per se*. It is about the other side of the equation: the Americans whom so many people believe to be mindlessly following their leaders. For a moment, let's forget about the fraud perpetrated on lemmings and just ask about the intended analogy: Who *are* these Americans that are marching willingly to death? Those responsible for "...the persistence of superpower nuclear arsenals that

♦ Thanks are due to Bruce Bennett, Co-Director of Allende Books, LaPaz, Mexico, for alerting me to the lemmings misrepresentation.

threaten global catastrophe...” (Ellsberg 2010)? Well, no, that’s not what anyone says. Or does it refer to the acceleration of U.S. military suicides (Hayden 2010)? No, that’s not it. It turns out that they are talking about citizens who have never joined activists’ groups. But are they suicidal?

I would say no more suicidal than the lemmings. Quiet they may be, but their opinions and their actions show a complete disinterest in militarism. Immediately after the W. T. C. attack, most U.S. citizens, responding to disinformation, favored armed intervention. Thereafter, however, support took a precipitous drop; public opinion has since consistently held that both wars were mistakes and advised the immediate withdrawal of troops. Throughout 10 years of constant warfare, less than 1 % of U.S. citizens have joined what is considered to be a volunteer army. The disinterest in militarism makes any mention of a draft or other kind of sacrifice for the war effort an impossibility.

Subliminal Truths

Thus, a radical transformation to an imperialistic foreign policy and a permanent war economy has taken place against the expressed will of most citizens, even though millions of people have lost jobs and homes as a direct result. It is only fair to ask, why are all these anti-war citizens inactive? I have argued that at least one of the reasons for this anomaly may be psychological: the blocking of rational thought by cultural concepts so obvious that they don’t usually get examined carefully

I call such ideas subliminal truths (or sub-ts) (Hopkins 2008). Sub-ts can be of recent vintage and limited influence (as the lemming concept) or else they can be of ancient pedigree, having generated a host of other, related sub’ ts (e.g., *warfare has a necessary purifying function*). They can be true or false, but they are difficult to evaluate because it takes courage to question the obvious. For example, the lemming metaphor has developed a life of its own, something that might well make one refrain from humiliating a friend with: “No, you’re wrong; you see, lemmings...”

Since President Eisenhower famously warned about the dangerous growth of what he termed a military-industrial complex, the country has simultaneously moved in two directions: toward hierarchy, empire, uniculturalism, and force, on one hand, and sharing, equality, and respect for cultural diversity on the other. This disjunction is well illustrated by the following attitude toward Cindy Sheehan who became a leader in the peace movement after confronting President Bush about her son’s death in Iraq.

I’ve never heard of a woman protesting a war in front of a leader’s home in my life. I’ve never heard of anything so outrageous.—John Tierney, Heritage Found.forum.

To understand his outrage, one must realize that Sheehan’s actions clash with bedrock themes of U.S. cultural narratives 1) the pride of a “gold star mother,” (essential femininity) 2) the heroic rite of passage (essential masculinity), 3) American exceptionalism, and-- To understand the fourth, it is necessary to quote this *NYT* journalist further. Criticizing the conduct of the war (not its immorality), Mr. Tierney opined that he would not like to see his 20-year-old son participate in the Iraq invasion. Yet, in the next breath, he declared it to be “automatic” that anyone who joins a protest group is supporting communists--and Sheehan herself to be an anti-American communist

(Milbank 2005). The seeming contradiction in Tierney's thinking disappears if one has never stopped believing that *obedience* is a paramount virtue in itself. Today, most U.S. citizens are well aware of the tragic consequences of mindless obedience to authority (Milgram 2004). The masculinity of militarism has been assailed from various different vantage points; belief in the exceptional purity of the country has been damaged. And when did you last see a news photo of a Gold Star Mom—beaming through her tears?

The sociological sea-change that engulfed U.S. over the last century is reflected in these interrelated issues of war, gender, and authority. “Hell, no, I won't go!” shouted 1960s long-haired young men, thumbing their noses at anyone who would call them cowards as young women thumbed their noses at ancient notions of feminine modesty: “Girls say *yes* to boys who say *no*!” It is this refusal to be controlled by humiliation that infuriated conservatives, causing a strident backlash: “We're very bad at making people feel shameful.” lamented James Q. Wilson (2002), a member of the rightwing chorus to “bring back shame.”

II Militarizing (part of) the younger generation: a 2-tier system of public education

Societal engineering

War has never regained its glamour, and military recruiters have had to resort to various creative stratagems to make quota. The Obama administration gave them a huge helping hand by appointing Arne Duncan Secretary of Education. As Chief Executive Officer for the Chicago Public School System from 2001-2009, Duncan—a businessman, not an educator— had helped create the most militarized public school system in the country. It is a 2-tier system: one kind of school for poor children in the inner cities and another for kids living in affluent neighborhoods. As Jitu Brown, a Chicago high school teacher, explained:

... one of the major issues is that they are throwing millions of dollars of resources into militarizing our schools and not putting those same resources into making public schools better....So we feel like the priority is not to make sure that our young people have the opportunity to do better than their parents, but that the intent is to prepare young people for the armed services (Goodman 2010).

Clearly, U.S. political leaders, pressured to supply soldiers for a perpetual warfare state, have given up on the present generation, as recruiters target children as young as eleven for JROTC programs in the militarized school system.

Most U.S. soldiers grew up in right-wing families that consider unquestioning obedience to authority, patriotism and military service to be cornerstones of their value system; so those who eventually turn away from war do so knowing that they are likely to have to face humiliation from family and friends. Thus war resistance is rarely a step taken lightly; it requires the confidence to seek information, the strength to deliberate, and the courage to maintain one's conviction to the point of ignoring the incomprehension of others, even close relatives. As warfare increasingly targets civilians, more and more

soldiers are refusing orders to kill non-combatants. It is estimated that World War II civilian deaths rose to over 50 % of war mortalities as opposed to c. 5% during the first world war. No official record of civilian deaths is maintained today; however, the documents released by WikiLeaks confirm the war resisters' testimony, suggesting that the disparity has continued even more sharply—as might be expected in a *total war* structure that has erased the boundaries between residential and combat areas.

III Voices of the war resisters: a plea for their support

Disillusionment

I guess the hardest thing for people to understand is the reason you join the military is not the reason you leave it. Not knowing the truth. Your basic role as a soldier being invalidated, finding out your job has no meaning. No reason.... —**Kimberly Rivers**, a check point guard who refused a second deployment to Iraq (War Resisters Support Campaign Web Archives).

.... I'm being taught that I'm going to the desert to, excuse the racial slur, "kill ragheads."--Robin Long was raised in a military family in Boise, Idaho; but, during Boot Camp, soldiers returning from combat told stories that gave him "a really sick feeling in my stomach...." (Lazare 2009)

The C-word

I know many Americans have their minds made up about people like me. They think we are cowards who just couldn't make it. I don't blame them. I had my own mind made up about war deserters long before I set foot in Iraq. But I know right from wrong - --from **Joshua Key's** book *The Deserter's Tale* (as told to L. Hill) p. 8.

*I look around at the other MPs in the convoy and see suspicion and disdain on their faces. They agree with him. They think I'm a coward, or a sympathizer. Five minutes ago I looked around and saw friends, now I see strangers..—from **Aidan Delgado's** book, *The Sutras of Au Ghraib*, p. 70. Delgado was trying to remonstrate with his buddy who had suddenly turned a gun on an innocent Iraqi civilian at a rest stop in Nasiriyah. It was a turning point for Delgado who became a conscientious objector, a Buddhist and a strong advocate for peace.*

Studies in Dignity and Humiliation has done a great job of publicizing efforts to expose the child soldier scandal. It would seem that our organization is ideally suited to highlighting the courage of war resisters as well; it is they who have been willing to face humiliation both from their families and the legal system--often leading to alienation from the former and jail sentences from the latter. Several have published books; a number have become outspoken advocates for resurrecting a democracy.

After the fact, how did the resisters feel about their decision?

Robin Long (before beginning his jail term): *Regardless of what hardships I go*

through, I could have easily put a family or someone else in that country through way more hardship....I have no regrets. (Lazare 2008)

Corey Glass (who won conscientious objection status)...eventually my conscience just caught up with me. *I feel horrible for being a part of it. If I could apologize to those people (Iraqis), every single one, I would.*

Joshua Key (The final words of his book, *A Deserter's Tale*) *I am neither a coward nor a traitor... I will never apologize for deserting the American army. I deserted an injustice and leaving was the right thing to do. I owe one apology and one apology only, and that is to the people of Iraq. (231)*

The courage and wisdom of these resisters, who have come to their convictions entirely from individual experience, should be studied by the next generation of students. They should be learning about how to avoid being manipulated by humiliation rather than when to salute an officer, burnish a button or fire a weapon.

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