

The Guilt They Carry

Wounds of Iraq and Afghanistan

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The announcement by Barack Obama of the surge in U.S. troop deployment to Afghanistan—from a two-thousand-strong force in 2001 to one hundred thousand troops sometime this year—came bundled with a provision for a quick drawdown starting in July 2011. The commander in chief's timetable, coming eight years after the U.S. campaign to crush al Qaeda and topple the Taliban, was a gesture toward closure and a signal of the gradual transfer of responsibility to the Afghans. But for most of the troops returning home, there will be neither emotional closure nor relief from the burden of personal responsibility that soldiers carry in war. Even when their conduct is just by the best standards of war, soldiers often judge themselves not by what they did but by what they wished they had done but couldn't do—because of the moral fog of war, or the whimsy of luck and accident, or the commingling of innocent and combatant in the crosshairs. Many feel profound guilt, perhaps irrationally given the limits of human agency, though all too reasonably given the need to assume personal responsibility in an inherently violent and chaotic environment.

Talk of soldiers' guilt is not often part of polite conversation. Talk about a soldier's psyche is usually in clinical terms of post-traumatic stress—flashbacks and nightmares, numbing and disconnection, hypervigilance and sensory overload—rather than in moral terms of conflict and guilt or shame. Yet psychological anguish in war is often *moral* anguish. Good soldiers worry about whether they did everything they could to save a buddy or whether they should have used more restraint at a checkpoint. They anguish over whether they

deserved to come home alive or physically whole when others returned in body bags or without limbs. They feel morally queasy about manipulating detainees whom they have come to know from months of interrogation, even though their methods fall far short of harsh coercion. At least, this is what I heard in some thirty interviews I conducted with soldiers who have returned from the current wars. What they carried home with them is an indicator of what is to come.

Moral Fatigue and the Tight Timetable

Right now, there are new background factors to take into account. One army colonel in Washington, with on-the-ground experience in counterinsurgency operations, expressed concerns about morale and morals on the battlefield. Although he stressed that his comments should not be taken as a criticism of the president's plan or as in any way representing the U.S. government, he wondered about troop reaction to Obama's tight timetable: "If you are thinking, I'm only there for a year, you may not be willing to make the emotional investment required to make the necessary sacrifices." He worried that the sense of mission "futility" would, in turn, lead to moral laxity on the battlefield—"with pressure to bend the restrictive rules of engagement on collateral damage, especially when permissions can be linked to force protection." (Full disclosure: the colonel, who served several deployments in Iraq training Iraqi police, is a Ph.D. student working under the author's supervision.)

These worries become even graver when we consider just how stretched and fatigued the U.S. military is. We have been fighting with an all-volunteer force, in challenging conditions of asymmetrical warfare, for nine years now, the

majority of that time on two fronts simultaneously. Many troops en route to Afghanistan or already there are on their second, third, and fourth deployments, with little time at home between rotations. The army's latest Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT) survey in November 2009 clearly describes the psychological risks: "Service members on their third and fourth deployments report significantly more stress, psychological problems, and among married Service Members...more marital problems compared to Soldiers on their first or second deployment." In 2007, the MHAT "battlefield ethics" survey correlated acute combat stress with moral deficits on the battlefield, based on the self-reports of those who had high levels of anger that led to mistreatment of noncombatants, willingness to torture, and a general sense that noncombatants did not deserve dignity or respect. The anger is not only toward the enemy. It is no secret that the military is actively fighting a war against troop suicides, which have increased so alarmingly that they exceeded the suicide rate of the general U.S. population for the first time since tracking began by the Pentagon nearly thirty years ago. Suicide prevention is a standard part of the pre- and post-deployment training of military mental clinicians and chaplains. Families at home are also under severe stress, emotionally, psychologically, and financially. With daily e-mail and cell phone conversations between soldiers and their families, stateside family members suffer combat fatigue in real time alongside their loved ones on the battlefield. The family can now enter the war zone and the soldier's battle space in a way unparalleled in previous wars.

Accident and Luck Guilt

In my conversations with soldiers over the past five years, I've found that guilt is often the elephant in the room. It takes three archetypal forms that I call "accident guilt," "luck guilt," and "collateral damage guilt." The first two might be thought of as "subjective" and perhaps irrational, if we mean that the soldiers were not objectively culpable for things they unwittingly inflicted upon their comrades or for injuries that they themselves happened to have escaped. The

third is more complicated and the moral lines blurrier.

In the case of accident guilt, soldiers blamed themselves for accidents in which they were causally implicated or that happened under their watch, though they were not morally or legally at fault. In one wrenching case, the gun on a Bradley Fighting Vehicle misfired, blowing off most of the face of a private who was standing guard near the vehicle. The army officer in charge told me, "I'm the one who placed the vehicles; I'm the one who set the security. Like most accidents, I'm not in jail right now....I wasn't egregiously responsible. But...any one of a dozen decisions made over the course of a two-month period...made differently may have saved his life. So I deal with and still deal with the guilt of having cost him his life..." What he feels is that he somehow betrayed his private—that he failed in his command responsibility, even though he wasn't culpably negligent. In this case, the malfunction had to do with a faulty battery replacement. When the Bradley's ignition was turned on, the replacement battery in the turret failed to shut off current to the gun. The replacement was a marine-specification battery, the only one available at the time. The officer in charge had authorized the replacement after consulting with his maintenance team and after a thorough reading of the manuals. It had the same voltage as the original one, but different amperage. The amperage, they learned all too late, was critical. Army manuals now prohibit the use of that battery.

Luck guilt is a variant of survivor guilt. Several marines I interviewed in Annapolis felt that by being in Annapolis, and no longer in a combat zone, they had benefited from "undeserved" luck. They spoke often of needing to return to their brothers and sisters in the field. For some, abrupt ruptures from their units exacerbated the guilt and heightened the sense of needing to return. Others at Walter Reed Hospital, themselves severely wounded, still felt guilty for not suffering more, or as visibly, with limb loss or facial disfigurement. They viewed their "good luck" as a betrayal of those who lacked it. What they felt, at bottom, was deep empathic distress—as if they themselves were morally responsible for another's injury.

These forms of guilt are powerful and long

outlive the battlefield. They may not track objective guilt in the sense of matching culpability with wrongdoing. But they register the heightened sense of personal responsibility that warriors assume in entrusting themselves to each other's care and in pledging to do their utmost to bring each other home. They are manifestations of the solidarity that is at the heart of any cohesive brotherhood and sisterhood of arms.

Collateral Damage Guilt

But what of collateral damage guilt, where wrongdoing is not so easily ruled out? In particular, how should we understand the guilt feelings that may ensue from the unintended but foreseen killing of civilians as part of military engagements? The question is key for U.S. troops in Afghanistan, engaged in counterinsurgency operations where combatant and noncombatant routinely commingle and often have shifting identities that make discrimination very difficult.

Consider two cases that help bring potential moral reactions into focus. The first is a story National Public Radio correspondent Tom Bowman watched unfold in a combat outpost this past December. He was in a command center in Helmand Province when troops saw live on a video screen some men planting a roadside bomb. Other intelligence confirmed what they saw, including a marine radio intercept from the suspected insurgents and a sighting of men swimming across a canal carrying wires used to detonate a bomb. U.S. commanders considered calling in helicopters to shoot the would-be insurgents, but decided against it, because of the collateral damage that would be caused to civilian houses in the vicinity. The bomb went off, and the unit took losses. Its restraint complied with the rules of engagement set in place by the U.S. commanding general in Afghanistan, Stanley McChrystal, which require soldiers to take extra risks in order to limit civilian injuries. The loss was not easy to accept, but one lieutenant, U.S. Marine James Wendy, reflecting about his anger, told Bowman and NPR *Morning Edition* host Renee Montaigne, "If I had known how frustrating it'd be and was able to better prepare myself for that mentally, I think that maybe I

would've been better off."

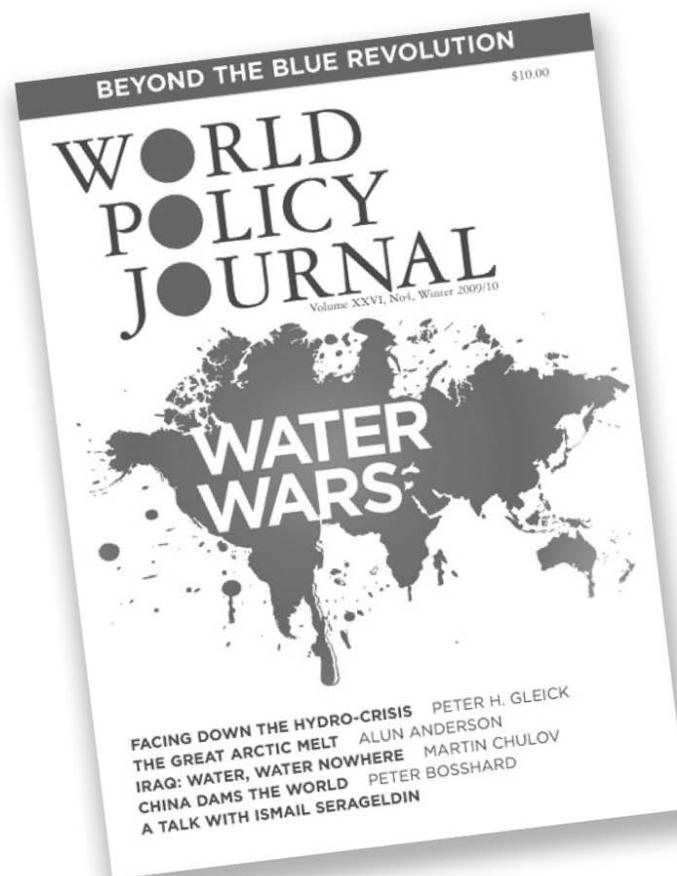
His remarks remind one of an ancient Stoic technique. Toughen yourself against loss by rehearsing it in advance, says Seneca. Take to heart and come to accept the sacrifice and additional risk required to protect civilians. Mentally rehearse and be prepared to make the sacrifice.

This is not merely a palliative. The content of the rehearsal is a requirement for just conduct in a soldier, for *jus in bello*. Avishai Margalit and Michael Walzer have reformulated the point made some thirty years ago by Walzer in *Just and Unjust Wars*—then in the context of Vietnam, and restated now in the context of Israel's war in Gaza: soldiers must "*intend not to kill civilians, and that active intention can be made manifest only through the risks the soldiers themselves accept in order to reduce the risks to civilians.*" It is not enough for harm to civilians to be unintended, even if foreseen. Combatants have the responsibility to take on extra risk to themselves in order to minimize civilian harm. No one should downplay how hard it is for a soldier to accept that risk, which may call mission success into doubt.

Lt. Wendy struggles to accept the moral cost of exposing his troops to risk in order to minimize collateral damage. In a group interview I conducted at the U.S. Naval Academy in the spring of 2007, marine and naval officers spoke powerfully about the other side of collateral damage—accepting civilian deaths. Marine Col. Bob Durkin commanded a battalion just south of Baghdad in the Sunni Triangle during Operation Iraqi Freedom II. He recalled how "emotionally upset" his marines became when Iraqi children were injured or killed when cars ran the "trigger lines" at vehicle checkpoints. Navy Lt. Com. Irv Elsten elaborated: in some cases, families would be put on the hood of a car that was followed by a pickup truck with armed Fedayeen (Baathist loyalists) intent on running the checkpoint. If the injuries or deaths were of an adult male whom they suspected was a suicide bomber or even a woman who might be concealing explosives under a large burka, his marines, Durkin said, would "generally...justify it to themselves, rightly or wrongly." They would reason, "Even if I couldn't find out, it *coulda been* this or *coulda been* that." But when children were involved, "there was a dramatic psychological difference."

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The marines would immediately become “visibly upset...” In the case of a badly hurt child, “they would go out of their way to try calling in medevac aircraft to get the kid out to the hospital.” It was just different, he said, when kids were involved. The marines couldn’t shake what they had done.

In these incidents, Durkin’s marines were in compliance with the rules of engagement. Yet what they did felt morally awful, and they sought immediate moral repair.

Psychoanalysis provides one way to think about their reaction. Soldiers are often boy warriors, barely older than adolescents. The image of the helpless child may throw the marine back to an image of himself, not so long ago, as a child dependent on adults for protection and survival. Adults, after all, are supposed to construct a sound moral order. Marines in counterinsurgency operations, in Afghanistan, for example, are moral legislators in all too concrete a way. They are staffing checkpoints, securing and protecting a population, keeping the Taliban at bay, sustaining services that allow local Afghan police to enforce rules that are better than those warlords might impose. They are trying to keep children from falling prey to those warlords. Durkin’s marines fervently wished to be the good cop, who can restrain his fire when innocent children’s lives are at stake. And the sense that they may have failed, even if the rules of engagement permitted the failure, did not sit easy. Moral phenomenology does not prescribe what rules of engagement ought to look like. But here it does help us understand how more restrictive rules might engage the moral psyche and become deeply internalized.

U.S. troops face and will continue to face another experience of collateral damage in Afghanistan—unintended civilian harm caused by warriors fighting remotely. “Cubical warriors,” as they are sometimes called, currently operate predator drones in Afghanistan and Iraq from bases thousands of miles away, in some cases from Air Force trailer complexes outside Las Vegas. Here, the very notion of a soldier assuming additional risk, or taking any risk at all, to protect civilian populations falls out of the equation. The idea of unit cohesion, of solidarity and the emotional protection it offers, also falls away for these soldiers. One might argue

that the armor of solidarity isn’t needed once fear and risk are removed. But the moral insulation of distance is not all-protecting. There is the guilt of being physically out of harm’s way while others remain at risk. And there is the anomie of fighting for but without the others—like going to sea without ship or shipmates or like fighting without a band of warriors before whom honor and shame motivate acts of courage. Honor, especially in its Homeric mode, where it is linked with machismo and the glory of decoration—still the archetype for many in the military today—can be a misplaced warrior virtue. But it needn’t be. It can produce a willingness to take risks to protect those who are not themselves trained to take risks.

In December of last year, my father was buried with military honors for his service as an army medic in the Second World War. As a bugler played taps, my own guilt welled up, perhaps a proxy of what I thought my father might feel—that he had survived the war and gone on to enjoy a long life. With fatalities mounting from two current wars, there were many others more deserving of military burials than he. If there were a scarcity of resources, the honors should go to them. I still believe that. But I also knew that my father had never stopped carrying his war. Until his dying day, he wore his dog-tags on his key chain, something I never noticed until I went to the hospital to recover his belongings. He was of the generation of laconic warriors who believed they should not burden their families with what a soldier saw or did. My father was a medic; though he was trained as a rifleman, he never discharged his weapon in battle. But what he felt goes beyond the simple guilt endemic to an enterprise in which bloodshed and violence are an everyday reality. Merely taking part in that enterprise exacts a toll. He assumed personal responsibility for what he saw, as do all soldiers who inhabit the complex mental space of war.

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