

Rejecting the Normalization of Perpetual War

by William Rivers Pitt via jane - Truthout *Sunday, May 13 2018, 5:01am*

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My daughter was born in the 22nd year of the Forever War, which stands today upon its 27th year and counting. People who should know better may tell you the war started only 17 years ago, after September 11, but those people are likely trying to sell you something, and it's probably more war.



The Forever War began as Desert Storm and wended its way through different iterations such as Operation Desert Fox, before morphing into the current multi-theater murder machine we know today. It has no Pentagon jargon name any more, not really. It's just forever.

They came for me just before it all began. I was a newly minted high school graduate, green as new grass, when the man in the uniform paid his call. Saddam Hussein is as dangerous as Adolph Hitler, the Army recruiter told me in my living room, with a huge army that threatens the world. War is coming. If I join the Reserve Officer Training Corps in September, however, I wouldn't see that war for another four years, and I would be an officer when I did. "Probably," he said, "it will all be over by then."

My father heard a similar argument some 25 years before my conversation with the recruiter, and heeded it by joining ROTC before volunteering for Vietnam. A good FDR liberal from the Deep South, where they still remembered the Tennessee Valley Authority (a wildly successful New Deal jobs program) with deep fondness, my father wanted to run for office someday, and you didn't run for office without time in uniform back then.

So he went, and he came home, but he never came back, not all of him. In many ways, I lost my father to that war before I ever met him. Even then, so long ago, I knew this about him, about war. Remembering, I thanked the recruiter for his time and sent him on his way.

My father passed away three years ago with pieces of his heart, mind and soul still lost thousands of miles away. I still have his dog tags. His war lasted 25 years. My war, the one I chose not to fight, will be turning 30 soon with no end in sight. I have never fought in it, but it is my war nonetheless, and now my daughter's. The Forever War is a generational affair.

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I think about him now and again, and wonder how many kids like me he fed to the Forever War. I

wonder if he even knows. I wonder if he remembers saying that to me. I wonder how many times he said it to others, and if he is still saying it today, out there in living rooms with other green kids. Someone like him is saying something like that somewhere, right now, because the machine is always hungry.

Here is a slice of our cruel, blood-rusted Forever War in its current state: Bombings and killings continue unabated in Afghanistan. Bombings and killing continue unabated in Iraq, where weapons of mass destruction have still not been found. Syria is a killing field, as is Yemen. Lebanon still bleeds. Iran, which has entirely fulfilled its end of the bargain, watched in rage this week as a nuclear deal struck with the US and Europe was shredded in yet another dangerous move by Donald Trump, who sought to placate the John Bolton wing of his rudderless party. Libya, Egypt and much of North Africa are in violent turmoil. Millions upon millions of war refugees suffer the cruel indignities of displacement and want.

With the nomination of Gina Haspel to run the Central Intelligence Agency, we see a day in the life of the Forever War in miniature. A debate has broken out regarding the efficacy of torture. See, our government tortured some folks during the Forever War, as President Obama blithely admitted back in 2014. Our government tortured people in Iraq, Afghanistan, in so-called "black sites" around the world, on a base 90 miles from Florida and, in at least one instance, right here on US soil.

Gina Haspel ran one of these black sites as a CIA operative, oversaw the practice of torture, and later destroyed the evidence of those vicious crimes. Now, Donald Trump wants to put her in charge of the CIA, because torturing other human beings is no impediment to promotion these days. When questioned by Congress this week, Haspel pledged not to re-start a torture program but stopped short of condemning the practice outright.

For John McCain, Republican Senator from Arizona, Haspel's answers fell far short of the mark. "Ms. Haspel's role in overseeing the use of torture by Americans is disturbing," McCain said in a statement after her testimony was concluded. "Her refusal to acknowledge torture's immorality is disqualifying. I believe the Senate should exercise its duty of advice and consent and reject this nomination."

For the record, I generally do not like John McCain much at all. Notwithstanding his glorious ability to get under Trump's skin like an Alabama tick, I consider the Senator from Arizona to be a cruel bannerman for the hard right. On this specific issue, however, McCain's opinion is above reproach, as well it should be given his personal experience.

In 1967, McCain's A-4E Skyhawk was shot down over Hanoi by a missile. The crash left him with two broken arms and a broken leg. His captors crushed his shoulder with a rifle butt and stabbed him with a bayonet. He was given scant medical treatment, beaten at two-hour intervals for extended periods, and placed in solitary confinement for two years. Then it got worse. An attempt at suicide was thwarted by the guards. This was his life for more than five years. When he finally came home, his hair had turned white.

In a just world, the opinion of a man like John McCain on the topic of torture would be respected. At minimum, it would not be insulted. Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Thomas McInerney and Kelly Sadler of the White House communications office remind us, sadly, that we do not live in a just world.

Lt. Gen. McInerney went on Fox Business this past Thursday to argue in favor of torture, and by proxy the nomination of Haspel, claiming that torture is effective because it worked on John McCain. "That's why they call him 'Songbird John,'" said McInerney, coughing up the old canard about

McCain giving intelligence to his captors in exchange for better treatment. In essence, McInerney said torture works because it turned John McCain into a traitor.

Kelly Sadler's job at the White House is to manage talking points for administration allies to deploy during media appearances. On the same day that an Air Force general accused a sitting US senator and torture survivor of treason on live TV, Sadler found herself in a communications office staff meeting about the Haspel nomination. When the subject of McCain's statement came up, Sadler said, "It doesn't matter, he's dying anyway." This statement has since been twice confirmed.

In other words, for the crimes of detesting torture and disliking the president, spokespeople for the party McCain has served throughout his career have now labeled him traitor and buried him before he is dead. "I like people that weren't captured," Trump said of McCain during the campaign. The fish rots from the head down.

That's where we are today, but that's not all of it, not by half. Donald Trump and his henchmen are a symptom, not a cause.

To nick a line I once used about George W. Bush, blaming Trump for all this is like blaming Mickey Mouse when Disney screws up. We have been in an active shooting war in one form or another for almost 30 years now, and have been on a wartime economic footing since President Truman signed the National Security Act more than 60 years ago. Within that context, Trump just came down with the last drop of rain.

The Forever War is not just in the Middle East. It is in Korea, where US troops still stand to post along the DMZ. It is in Vietnam, where hundreds of thousands of children have been born with spina bifida, neural tube problems, missing limbs, missing vertebrae, autoimmune disorders and more, four decades after the US finished hosing that nation down with Agent Orange. And yes, the Forever War is also in Iraq, which practically glows at night from all the depleted uranium the US has detonated there since 1991.

This is why we find ourselves today talking about torture the way other people talk about their sandwich order, and why powerful voices see fit to accuse torture survivors of treason. We have been thoroughly debased by all this war, all this violence, all this death for so many years. The most popular video games come with body counts. Neighbors with massive arsenals are the norm, and massacres flicker by like dandelion seeds.

We are a crumbling nation not just in a moral sense, but in a literal one. The trillions of dollars spent on the Forever War have turned our economy into a shaky shell game, and deprived us of the opportunity to make education, infrastructure, genuine health care and artistic achievement the cornerstones of our culture. When capitalism sits at the table with democracy, sooner or later all the plates are empty save for a golden few. The United States did not invent the concept of using war to plunder the treasury. It simply perfected the practice.

Donald Trump did not do this. He and his friends are merely taking mighty advantage of it. They know we are all smothered by the sense that it is this way because it has always been this way, and so it will always be this way. No greater lie could be told, yet we tell it to ourselves in word and deed every day, because we are very well trained after all these years.

This is the only world my daughter has known, the world I have known since I was a boy, the world that counts my father among its countless casualties.

By accepting this unendurable reality as the new normal, we are doing the war machine's work for it, oftentimes with earnest diligence. This must end. We cannot let the Forever War into our heads any more. I'm ready when you are.

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