

Avoiding the Truth About War

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Global Research, October 14, 2012

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Some years ago, back in the days when we were all campaigning about the illegal invasion of Iraq, I met a young officer from the Royal Engineers. He and his men had done a tour of duty in southern Iraq and he described how they “had not been fighting the Iraqis”, but rather “improving their lot” by rebuilding bridges and other infrastructure.

I asked him if he and his men ever thought about who had destroyed the bridges they were rebuilding (the answer being, of course, the RAF). I have never forgotten his reply: “We tried not to think about that.”

It seems there is an awful lot we try not to think about, especially where war is concerned. In the space of two days it was announced that 7 Royal Marines were under arrest, suspected of murdering an ‘insurgent’ in Afghanistan; David Cameron, always Prime Ministerial (or so he hopes), announced that a sum of £50 million pounds would be devoted to events commemorating the centenary of the First World War; and the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

I hate the way the word ‘insurgent’ is used by the politicians, military and media. The implication is that this is a terrorist, a thug, a person wholly outside the law and fully deserving of any death meted out to him by the US, the UK, NATO and ISAF – in other words by us, the West, the ‘bringers of freedom and democracy’. But an insurgent is simply someone who is in active revolt against a government in power, the government in Afghanistan’s case being one imposed on the country by the West after another fairly illegal invasion, and justified by some extremely fraudulent elections. Any Afghan insurgent, whether Taliban or not, is someone who wants the foreign invaders (that’s us) out. He has far more right to be there than any number of Royal Marines. But we try not to think about that.

Nor are the Taliban all they are made out to be by the West, even though the West is indirectly responsible for their creation. In order to get the Soviets out of Afghanistan the US helped in the formation and funding of the Mujahideen, a truly violent collection of fighters. The Soviets gone, the Mujahideen descended into vicious internal warfare and the people of Afghanistan suffered both from the violence and the rampant corruption. The Taliban movement grew out of the desire to protect the people from this corruption (for an informative retelling of this period, read James Fergusson’s excellent book *Taliban*). And, despite methods and an ideology we wouldn’t approve of, defeat the corruption they did. They would have eradicated the poppy production too, had we not interfered. But we try not to think about that.

How did the West end up conducting a long and bitter war against a state and its government that had not threatened the West nor posed any real danger to us? We’ve been given many spurious reasons – ending the opium production, defeating Al Qaeda,

‘stabilising’ the country and so on. We could add reasons like a gas and oil pipeline or minerals. Perhaps it was just sour grapes. How else could you justify a full-scale invasion of a country purely because you failed to capture or kill one man – Osama bin Laden, the US ‘s original target? Who the West at one time supported, whose family were favourites of the US administration? You can’t send armies after a small terrorist organisation, and small is what Al Qaeda has always been. The one thing the US and the UK won’t face, the huge elephant in the room, is that, despite greater numbers equipped with far superior technology, the whole sorry exercise is a failure. We’ll try very hard indeed not to think about that.

But – Royal Marines murdering an Afghan insurgent – how appalling! And, as so many pro-military commentators pointed out, how very rare. The great British (US, NATO, ISAF) soldiers are so disciplined, so mindful of the rules of combat, this simply never happens. Except that it does. They just hope the public has forgotten the last occasion, and the one before that and maybe they won’t find about all the unreported unlawful killings either. Never taken into account is that, regardless of the ‘proud military tradition’, the first casualty of war is the death of humanity in those who fight it. Men who are trained to kill will kill, regardless of their nationality. Nor do we consider that those who fight and kill for a living often end up with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD, now unfortunately common among both veterans and the serving military, is caused not just by what the sufferer has experienced but by what he/she has done – like killing people. But, because it is our brave boys we are talking about, we try not to think about that.

In his speech at the Imperial War Museum announcing the plans for the WWI commemorations, Cameron said, (the Museum, it should be remembered by our politicians, was formed to record the terror and futility of war rather than its celebration) that he wants the Museum to be enlarged so that it is even more ‘incredible’. The only incredible thing is that humanity is still allowing itself to be dragged into war instead of confining war itself to the Museum. “It is absolutely right that these commemorations should be given such priority,” he said. “Our duty with these commemorations is clear; to honour those who served; to remember those who died; and to ensure that the lessons learnt live with us for ever. And that is exactly what we will do.” And, considering that WWI led fairly directly to WWII and that there have been too few years since 1918 when UK forces weren’t fighting a war somewhere in the world, what lessons are those exactly, Mr Cameron? But we try not to think about that.

Instead, let’s distract ourselves by celebrating Europe being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize – and may I as a European go and collect the award and get my share of the prize money? I thought not. Eric Heffermehl in his book *The Nobel Peace Prize: what Nobel really wanted* shows quite clearly just how far the Nobel committee has strayed from the terms of Nobel’s will, which stated that the Peace Prize should be awarded to ‘*the person who has done the most or the best work for brotherhood between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses*’. The EU is not a person nor is it an organisation whose members are all dedicated to working for peace. After World Wars I and II, it was thankfully fairly unlikely (although still not impossible) that Europe would descend into such local aggression again – the EU had little to do with that. If anything the EU has simply helped Europeans to fight wars together rather than against each other. But Europe has done *nothing* to get rid of its standing armies – indeed our governments are far more likely to argue for their continuance and funding, despite the austere times we citizens live in. And when did the EU ever promote or hold international

peace conferences such as Nobel was familiar with – peace conferences that were aimed at the total abolition of militarism, arms trading and the scourge of war? How pitifully small is the number of Peace Prize recipients who have campaigned for the reduction of standing armies or held truly international peace conferences? But we try not to think about that.

Next month sees the sad anniversary of Armistice Day along with Remembrance Sunday – days awash with red poppies, parading soldiers and sermons about the continuing brave sacrifice of our ‘heroes’. So many wars and so many fallen to be commemorated since the end of ‘the war to end all wars’; except there is no end in sight, not with politicians who love the feel of power and arms traders who love the feel of money. Little mention will be made in all their speeches about the horrendous number of innocent civilians killed and maimed, livelihoods and homes destroyed, cultures vanished and the earth and all its other precious life trashed as we create our fallen heroes, heroes who did not sacrifice themselves but were instead sacrificed by their leaders. No mention will be made of the fact that we call them heroes in order to avoid recognising what they have done in our name. And certainly no mention will be made of all those who were not lucky enough to be killed, but return home with one or three limbs missing and with broken minds, living on our streets or in our prisons, relying on alcohol and drugs and yet more violence as they try to obliterate their memories of war.

Surely on just one day of the year we could be honest with each other and face up to what war is, what it does to people, and most of all, openly recognise the terror and violence our politicians are responsible for when they blithely send armies off to war. But no – we will try very hard not to think about any of that.

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