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This is what war does

John Chuckman

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A Canadian photographer named Bryan Adams (yes, the rock singer) has done something extraordinary in publishing a book of photographs of what war does to soldiers. The wounds of his subjects are not covered with gore as they would be on the battlefield. His pictures are clean studio shots. The subjects sometimes even are smiling. Their wounds are healed, at least as much as such wounds can ever be called healed, but the surrealistic sense of the pictures says

something profound story about our society. We've done these savage things to our own young, and then left them to spend the rest of their lives struggling with the results.

For an institution which quite literally dominates human history, it is a remarkable that the real face of war is never seen by most people. The press goes so far in avoiding it that it creates a fantasy picture, in many respects resembling those beautifully done dioramas of lead soldiers in famous battles. It's the same psychology at work when caskets containing the blasted remains of soldiers are draped with bright, cheery flags. And when war is over, there's the home town parade with flags and drums and high-stepping baton twirlers in cute little sequined outfits, with no sign of death or gore to be seen.

A few times in my life a bit of the truth has leaked out. During Vietnam, the first major war in the mature television age, the public was exposed to some of it. Not a great deal, mind you, but it was enough to provide governments a harsh warning on the effects such images have upon the public's support for war.

Fairly early, television showed us Marines dutifully torching the thatched homes of peasants, I'm sure never giving a thought to someone's doing the same to Mom and Dad's farmhouse back in Indiana. But still we never saw a hint of the wholesale slaughters of a war which extinguished three million lives. We saw the distant flashes and puffs of smoke of bombings, including the instantaneous infernos of that hellish stuff, napalm, ripping across a landscape, but never a single frame of the resulting incinerated bodies. No newsreel ever showed close-ups of a village or city after American carpet-bombing by B-52s. We did see the odd distant shot of a prisoner falling from a high-flying helicopter but never the preceding close-up scene of his being hurled out by American Special Forces or intelligence operatives unhappy with his answers to questions.

I recall an American deserter speaking at a public meeting in Toronto of his raping a young Vietnamese woman and then emptying his rifle into her, an atrocity which is reported to have been repeated many times over the years. After all, what do you think happens when young men, often from the most marginal backgrounds, are dumped in a foreign place they cannot understand and often hate, armed with powerful weapons and under no normal restraints? Young men, especially under stress, are capable of almost any savagery, and you do have a responsibility to consider that reality before sending them off to terrorize others.

Early during Vietnam I recall another young man briefly interviewed on television whose face had been turned into a molten-looking mass, perhaps from napalm, his mouth consisting of a hole into which a straw could be inserted. What purpose could possibly be worth that sacrifice? I'm not sure, but I know it wasn't a dirty colonial war in Vietnam started by cheating and lying to the people who had to fight it.

When Britain went to war in the Falklands, the warning of Vietnam was heeded. All the British people saw were selected, cleaned-up images of another dirty colonial war, images like a stalwart Maggie Thatcher waving off the Falklands fleet, and who on this planet could better play the role of a stern and impressive god of war than Mrs. Thatcher? She gave Winston Churchill himself a run for his money.

I did read of one instance of a dead or dying invading British soldier having been photographed on the beach with bowels torn open and spilled out, but the image was suppressed.

Some very heroic cameramen from the Middle East did obtain shocking images of the savagery of America's war in Iraq, a war in which cluster bombs were heavily used but also white phosphorus and depleted uranium shells. I recall images of horribly mangled children, burnt smudgy corpses, a woman virtually smashed into the ground, and others, but they were only a small sample of America's destruction of a million or so souls.

The images were found on not-widely-known sites on the Internet, even *Al-Jazeera* itself being then not familiar to most Americans. The images never made their way onto the pages of *The New York Times* or the evening news on NBC where they would have been seen by the millions of ordinary Americans in whose name the atrocities were committed. The American military does appear to have made an effort to target foreign journalists trying to capture some truth, killing the messengers, as it were, in the spirit of vicious boys ripping the wings off butterflies.

There were still other images from Iraq on the Internet, and these came straight from America's own dear "boys in harm's way." There was an Internet site, briefly, which provided young American soldiers with free access to raw pornographic sexual images in return for their submitting raw pornographic war images, as from cell phones and the like. There were reportedly large numbers of takers on the offer, sending in their snaps of things like bloody boots with bits of leg sticking out or of a human head half turned into beef tartar before Pentagon matrons dedicated to decency in war closed the operation down.

America's horrors at Abu Ghraib were heavily censored. According to America's best investigative journalist, Seymour Hersh, we saw only the most innocuous images of degrading treatment, the frat-boy pranks with naked humans, dog leashes, and shit. We did not see the hardcore stuff of torture, rape, including of children, and death, pictures which did in fact exist but were suppressed. The stuff from Guantanamo was along the same lines, images of degrading treatment, men in jump suits and chains kneeling in tiny cells - just enough for the folks back home to say "Good, it's what they deserve," but not enough to shock or terrify Americans about what was being done in their name.

I recall an image from Israel's first savage assault on Gaza, one killing several hundred children and more than a thousand others, an image of a narrow street running with a small river of blood and desperate people trying to pass without stepping into it. Such images are rare because Israel allows no one access to document its filthy work. Even after the savagery is over, various organizations and officials generally are refused entry even on humanitarian missions, as is the case today after a second mass murder in Gaza killing even more children than the first.

War is such a time of fearful darkness and chaos that great horrors can be hidden easily under its cover. In Afghanistan, three thousand American prisoners were "disappeared" by one of America's war lord allies by being taken out in sealed trucks into the desert to suffocate, their bodies then dumped into mass graves. This occurred shortly after American Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made a shameful Nazi-like public statement that the large numbers of Al Qaeda prisoners being held in Afghanistan should either be killed or walled away for the rest of their lives. This war crime was committed right under the noses of occupying American soldiers and clearly with Mr. Rumsfeld's secret blessing, and it has never been featured or investigated except by a British documentary film maker.

It is invariably human nature to show others our work, of any kind, when we are proud of what it is that we have done. The great irony of war is that we invariably are ashamed of what we have done, and yet we repeat, some of us, the work again and again.

Another great irony of war is that it is almost never about defending ourselves, although that is what the propaganda never stops telling us that that is what it is about. That is why America uses the term Department of Defense, and Israel calls its army the Israeli Defense Force.

What was America defending in Vietnam, in Cambodia, in Serbia, in Afghanistan, or in Iraq? Only its right to tell others what to do, a right based solely on the concept of might makes right, the slogan of the bully. So too for its many violent and destructive interventions using hired thugs into the affairs of others, whether in Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Iran, Syria, Ukraine, or other places.

What does Israel defend in its endless assaults upon its neighbors, none of them remotely capable of seriously threatening Israel much less destroying it, and its ceaseless hectoring for even more war in the region? Again, nothing more than the right to tell others what to do, a right based only on might makes right. And what of its countless assassinations in half a dozen countries, of its interference into the affairs of Egypt, Iran, Syria, Iraq, and other countries?

I notice something in what I've written. While I started with war's effect upon soldiers, almost all my words deal with civilians, and that brings us to the greatest irony of modern war: soldiers are

just a tiny part of those killed and brutally injured. It cannot be otherwise with missiles, heavy bombing, and other indiscriminate weapons. Modern war is mass killing of civilians, always and everywhere, a practice which evolved in World War II and has done nothing but progress in that direction since. Even when they aren't the actual targets, as in America's nightmarish assassination-by-drone project, large numbers of dead or mangled civilians are the unavoidable consequence. Well, if you're in for killing mere suspects as in the drone project, I guess extra civilians don't mean much, do they? "In for penny, in for pound," as they say.

We've even developed special language for the realities of indiscriminate killing. Israel, at the very least, always is said to be killing "militants." I don't know about you, but I've never met a "militant," and I doubt I'd be able to recognize one walking down the street. But our clever press instantly recognizes them when they are shot full holes by Israeli soldiers. You see, Israel simply can never be wrong in our press, so if it hasn't killed terrorists, it has to have killed "militants," and that's surely almost as good.

As for the tens of thousands maimed and slaughtered by America's hideous bombings in many lands, well, they are called, right on the evening news by announcers in pancake makeup with blow-dried hair in momentarily subdued tones just before moving on to the sports scores, "collateral damage."