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Empire and Its Consequences

by Robert C. Koehler
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Ever notice the way certain basic human values quietly transform into their opposite on their way to becoming national policy?

At the human level, the immorality of murder is fundamental, and most people understand the insanity of armed hatred. Keeping these dark forces under wraps is essential to the existence of human society. So why is it, then, that at the abstract level of nationalism, those forces are honored, worshiped, saluted, extolled as glorious, and given command of an enormous budget?

Why is it that their perpetuation via increasingly sophisticated technology is equated with national security and no one talks about the completely predictable negative consequences of basing security on murder and hatred?

And why does it feel so naïve to be asking such questions?

It's as though the arrangement was settled four or five millennia ago. Killing is wrong, but we have to kill one another, you know, in self-defense, in order to survive. And hating people is wrong — mocking them, dehumanizing them — but some people ask for it. They do it to us, so we have no choice but to do it back. Hate, dehumanize, eliminate our enemies and . . . voila, we're safe, at least for the time being. What don't you get about that?

Criticism of such policy is generally couched in terms that remove the alleged naïveté of the criticism, but I'm wondering if it isn't time to stare directly at the fundamental wrongness of war.

Let me put it as nakedly as I can: A policy of murder and hatred is, in itself, morally wrong as well as strategically untenable. Anything that flows from such a policy, even if it seems to be beneficial — such as regional dominance, access to oil, suppression of an enemy's power or plain old revenge — is inherently unstable and doomed to disastrous failure. This may be the way empires act, but it's bad policy. If it creates "collateral damage," it's bad policy.

I put it this way because I'm haunted by the statistic that U.S. military veterans are committing suicide at the rate of 18 per day and that the term for the condition of many, maybe most, veterans and soldiers after their deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq is moral injury, as I wrote about last week. Their lives have been seriously damaged not just by physical and psychological injury but by something else as well — by having transgressed a fundamental spiritual threshold and severed the connection that unites us. We can't dehumanize others without doing the same to ourselves, and waking up to the reality of such a state is sometimes unbearable.

And it's not just the deployment — the participation in an inhumane occupation and war — that dehumanizes. The military training that precedes deployment is where it starts. The training is not simply in the craft and technology of killing, but in the dehumanizing of self and other. The U.S. military, whatever else it is, is a cult of hatred with a virtually unlimited budget. This has been born out in the testimony of numerous vets over the years, testimony that could fill volumes, e.g.:

"I joined the Army on my 18th birthday. When I joined I was told racism was gone from the military," Mike Prysner said during the 2008 Winter Soldier hearings. "After 9/11, I (began hearing) towel head, camel jockey, sand nigger. These came from up the chain of command. The new word was hadji. A hadji is someone who takes a pilgrimage to Mecca. We took the best thing from Islam and made it the worst thing." Prysner was part of a panel called "Racism and War: the Dehumanization of the Enemy."

Military recruits march to cadences that celebrate killing children in the marketplace and cry "kill" before they can eat a meal. They're told they're animals, stripped of "sentimental" feelings, trained to kill on command with cold efficiency. In that condition they serve U.S. foreign policy.

The argument, of course, is that we have enemies out there who despise us and want what we have, and our only protection is a layer of ruthless, well-armed killers that patrol the perimeter and keep our communities and our children safe. The argument is that our foreign policy is ultimately humane, that it spreads democracy, that it targets only bad guys and protects decent people everywhere.

But this argument breaks down when you look at what we do, from Dresden and Hiroshima to My Lai and Fallujah. It breaks down when you read about the rationale of our massive bombing of Baghdad at the start of the Iraq war, as spelled out by Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade in the 1996 Defense Department publication, "Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance":

"The intent here is to impose a regime of *Shock and Awe* through delivery of instant, nearly incomprehensible levels of massive destruction directed at influencing society writ large,

meaning its leadership and public, rather than targeting directly against military or strategic objectives. . . .

"The employment of this capability against society and its values, called 'counter-value' . . . (consists of) massively destructive strikes directly at the public will of the adversary to resist."

This is the morality of empire, the morality of domination. We didn't invent it; we just carry on the tradition, which goes back through colonialism and slavery to the Inquisition ("kill them all, let God sort them out") to Rome ("they create a wasteland and call it peace") and beyond, to the dawn of civilization.

I think the consequences have finally caught up with us.