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American Anniversaries from Hell

By Tom Engelhardt

March 28, 2013

It's true that, last week, few in Congress cared to discuss, no less memorialize, the 10th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. Nonetheless, two anniversaries of American disasters and crimes abroad — the “mission accomplished” debacle of 2003 and the 45th anniversary of the My Lai massacre — were at least noted in passing in our world. In my hometown paper, the *New York Times*, the Iraq anniversary was memorialized with a lead op-ed by a former advisor to General David Petraeus who, amid the rubble, went in search of all-American “silver linings.”

Still, in our post-9/11 world, there are so many other anniversaries from hell whose silver linings don't get noticed. Take this April. It will be the ninth anniversary of the widespread release of the now infamous photos of torture, abuse, and humiliation from Abu Ghraib. In case you've forgotten, that was Saddam Hussein's old prison where the U.S. military taught the fallen Iraqi dictator a trick or two about the destruction of human beings. Shouldn't there be an anniversary of some note there? I mean, how many cultures have turned dog collars (and the dogs that go with them), thumbs-up signs over dead bodies, and a mockery of the crucified Christ into screensavers?

Or to pick another not-to-be-missed anniversary that, strangely enough, goes uncelebrated here, consider the passage of the USA Patriot Act, that ten-letter acronym for “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism”? This October 26th will be the 11th anniversary of the hurried congressional vote on

that 363-page (essentially unread) document filled with right-wing hobbyhorses and a range of provisions meant to curtail American liberties in the name of keeping us safe from terror. “Small government” Republicans and “big government” Democrats rushed to support it back then. It passed in the Senate in record time by 98-1, with only Russ Feingold in opposition, and in the House by 357-66 — and so began the process of taking the oppressive powers of the American state into a new dimension. It would signal the launch of a world of ever-expanding American surveillance and secrecy (and it would be renewed by the Obama administration at its leisure in 2011).

Or what about celebrating the 12th anniversary of Congress’s Authorization for Use of Military Force, the joint resolution that a panicked and cowed body passed on September 14, 2001? It wasn’t a declaration of war — there was no one to declare war on — but an open-ended grant to the president of the unfettered power to use “all necessary and appropriate force” in what would become a never-ending (and still expanding) “Global War on Terror.”

Or how about the 11th anniversary on January 11th — like so many such moments, it passed unnoted — of the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, that jewel in the crown of George W. Bush’s offshore Bermuda Triangle of injustice, with its indefinite detention of the innocent and the guilty without charges, its hunger strikes, and abuses, and above all its remarkable ability to embed itself in our world and never go away? Given that, on much of the rest of the planet, Guantanamo is now an icon of the post-9/11 American way of life, on a par with Mickey Mouse and the Golden Arches, shouldn’t its anniversary be noted?

Or to look ahead, consider a date of genuine consequence: the CIA’s first known assassination by drone, which took place in Yemen in 2002. This November will be the 11th anniversary of that momentous act, which would embed “targeted killing” deep in the American way of war, and transform the president into an assassin-in-chief. It, too, will undoubtedly pass largely unnoticed, even if the global drone assassination campaigns it initiated may never rest in peace.

And then, of course, there are the little anniversaries from hell that Americans could care less about — those that have to do with slaughter abroad. If you wanted to, you could organize these by the military services. As last year ended, for instance, no one marked the 11th anniversary of the first Afghan wedding party to be wiped out by the U.S. Air Force. (In late December 2001, a B-52 and two B-1B bombers, using precision-guided weapons, eradicated a village of celebrants in eastern Afghanistan; only two of 112 villagers reportedly survived.) Nor in May will anyone here mark the ninth anniversary of an American air strike that took out wedding celebrants in the western Iraqi desert near the Syrian border, killing more than 40 of them.

Nor, this July 12th, to switch to the U.S. Army, should we forget the sixth anniversary of the infamous Apache helicopter attacks on civilians in the streets of Baghdad in which at least 11 adults were killed and two children wounded? All of this was preserved in a military video kept secret until released by WikiLeaks. Or how about the first anniversary of the “Kandahar massacre,” which passed on March 11th without any notice at all? As you undoubtedly remember, Army Staff Sergeant Robert Bales allegedly spent that night in 2012 slaughtering 16 civilians, including nine children, in two Afghan villages and, on being taken into custody, “showed no remorse.”

When it comes to the Marines, here's a question: Who, this November 19th, will mark the eighth anniversary of the slaughter of 24 unarmed civilians, including children and the elderly, in the Iraqi village of Haditha for which, after a six-year investigation and military trials, not a single Marine spent a single day in prison? Or to focus for a moment on U.S. Special Forces: will anyone on August 21st memorialize the 90 or so civilians, including perhaps 15 women and up to 60 children, killed in the Afghan village of Azizabad while attending a memorial service for a tribal leader who had reportedly been anti-Taliban?

And not to leave out the rent-a-gun mercenaries who have been such a fixture of the post-9/11 era of American warfare, this September 16th will be the sixth anniversary of the moment when Blackwater guards for a convoy of U.S. State Department vehicles sprayed Baghdad's Nisour Square with bullets, evidently without provocation, killing 17 Iraqi civilians and wounding many more.

All of the above only begins to suggest the plethora of blood-soaked little anniversaries that Americans could observe, if they cared to, from a decade-plus of the former Global War on Terror that now has no name, but goes on no less intensely. Consider them just a few obvious examples of what former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once called the "known knowns" of our American world.

Impossible Anniversaries

In anniversary terms, Rumsfeld's second category — the "known unknowns" — is no less revealing of the universe we now inhabit; that is, our post-9/11 lives have been filled with events or acts whose anniversaries might be notable, if only we knew the date when they occurred. Take, for instance, the Bush administration's warrantless wiretapping program. Sometime in the first part of 2002, President Bush granted the National Security Agency the right to eavesdrop without court approval on people in the United States in the course of its terrorism investigations. This (illegal) program's existence was first revealed in 2005, but it remains shrouded in mystery. We don't know exactly when it began. So no anniversary celebrations there.

Nor for the setting up of the "Salt Pit," the CIA "black site" in Afghanistan where Khaled el-Masri, a German car salesman kidnapped by the CIA in Macedonia (due to a confusion of names with a suspected terrorist) was held and mistreated, or other similar secret prisons and torture centers in places like Lithuania, Poland, Rumania, and Thailand; nor for the creation of Camp Nama in Iraq, with its ominously named "Black Room," run as an interrogation center by the Joint Special Operations Command, where the informal motto was: "If you don't make them bleed, they can't prosecute for it."

Or how about the anniversary of the date — possibly as early as 2006 — when Washington launched history's first known cyberwar, a series of unprovoked cyberattacks ordered by George W. Bush and later Barack Obama, against Iran's nuclear program (and evidently some Middle Eastern banks dealing with that country as well). Given its potential future implications, that would seem to be a moment significant enough to memorialize, if only we knew when to do it.

Don't for a moment think, though, that any little survey of known knowns and known unknowns could cover the totality of America's unacknowledged anniversaries from hell. After all, there's Rumsfeld's third category, the "unknown unknowns." In our advancing world of secrecy, with the National Security Complex and parts of the U.S. military increasingly operating in a post-legal America, shielded from whistleblowers and largely unaccountable to the rest of us or the courts, you can be guaranteed of one thing: there's a secret history of the post-9/11 era that we simply don't know about — yet. Call this last category "the unknown anniversaries." We not only don't know when they began, but even what they are.

A Hidden History Waiting to Be Written

When I was a boy, I loved a CBS TV series called "You Are There," "anchored" by Walter Cronkite. It took you into history — whether of Joan of Arc's burning at the stake, the fall of the Aztec ruler Montezuma, or the end of the U.S. Civil War — and "reported" it as if modern journalists had been on the spot. (For years, I used to joke that the typical moment went like this: "General Lee, General Lee, rumor has it you're about to surrender to Grant at Appomattox!" "No comment.") The show had a signature tagline delivered in one of those authoritative male voices of the era that still rings in my head. It went: "What sort of day was it? A day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our times... all things are as they were then, and you were there."

If such a show were made about the post-9/11 years, it might have to be called "You Weren't There." Our days, instead of being filled with "those events that alter and illuminate our times," would be enshrouded in a penumbra of secrecy that could — as with Bradley Manning, CIA agent John Kiriakou, or other whistleblowers — only be broken by those ready to spend years, or even a lifetime in prison. If the National Security Complex and the White House had their way, we Americans would be left to celebrate a heavily cleansed and censored version of our own recent history in which the anniversaries that should really matter would be squirreled away in the files of the state apparatus. There can be no question that a hidden history of our American moment is still waiting to be uncovered and written.

And yet, despite the best efforts of the last two administrations, secrecy has its limits. We should already know more than enough to be horrified by the state of our American world. It should disturb us deeply that a government of, by, and for the war-makers, intelligence operatives, bureaucrats, privatizing mercenary corporations, surveillers, torturers, and assassins is thriving in Washington. As for the people — that's us — in these last years, we largely weren't there, even as the very idea of a government of, by, and for us bit the dust, and our leaders felt increasingly unconstrained when committing acts of shame in our name.

So perhaps the last overlooked anniversary of these years might be the 12th anniversary of American cowardice. You can choose the exact date yourself; anytime this fall will do. At that moment, Americans should feel free to celebrate a time when, for our "safety," and in a state of anger and paralyzing fear, we gave up the democratic ghost.

The brave thing, of course, would have been to gamble just a little of our safety — as we do any day when we get into a car — for the kind of world whose anniversaries we would actually be proud to mark on a calendar and celebrate.

Among the many truths in that still-to-be-written secret history of our American world would be this: we the people have no idea just how, in these years, we've hurt ourselves.