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The World After Me: Eternal ‘Wartime’ in America

By Tom Engelhardt

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Army troops training at Fort Bragg, N.C.

I recently dug my mother’s childhood photo album out of the depths of my bedroom closet. When I opened it, I found that the glue she had used as a girl to paste her life in place had given way, and on many pages the photos were now in a jumble.

My mother was born early in the last century. Today, for most of that ancient collection of photos and memorabilia—drawings (undoubtedly hers), a Caruthers School of Piano program, a

Camp Weewan-Eeta brochure, a Hyde Park High School junior prom “senior ticket,” and photos of unknown boys, girls, and adults—there’s no one left to tell me who was who or what was what.

In some of them, I can still recognize my mother’s youthful face, and that of her brother who died so long ago but remains quite recognizable (even so many decades before I knew him). As for the rest—the girl in what looks like a gym outfit doing a headstand, all those young women lined up on a beach in what must then have been risqué bathing suits, the boy kneeling with his arms outstretched toward my perhaps nine-year-old mother—they’ve all been swept away by the tides of time.

And so it goes, of course. For all of us, sooner or later.

My mother was never much for talking about the past. Intent on becoming a **professional caricaturist**, she lit out from her hometown, Chicago, for the city of her dreams, New York, and essentially never looked back. For whatever reason, looking back frightened her.

And in all those years when I might have pressed her for so much more about herself, her family, her youthful years, I was too young to give a damn. Now, I can’t tell you what I’d give to ask those questions and find out what I can never know. Her mother and father, my grandparents who died before I was born, her sister whom I met once at perhaps age six, her friends and neighbors, swains and sidekicks, they’re all now the dust of history in an album that is disintegrating into a pile of black flakes at the slightest touch. Even for me, most of the photos in it are as meaningless (if strangely moving) as ones you’d pick up in an antique store or at a garage sale.

Lost Children on a Destabilizing Planet

I just had—I won’t say celebrated—my 72nd birthday. It was a natural moment to think about both the past that stretches behind me and the truncated future ahead. Recently, in fact, I’ve had the dead on my mind. I’m about to recopy my ancient address book for what undoubtedly will be the last time. (Yes, I’m old enough to prefer all that information on paper, not in the ether.) And of course when I flip through those fading pages, I see, as befits my age, something like a book of the dead and realize that the next iteration will be so much shorter.

It’s sometimes said of the dead that they’ve “crossed over.” In the context of our present world, I’ve started thinking of them as refugees of a sort—every one of them uprooted from their lives (as we all will be one day) and sent across some unknown frontier into a truly foreign land. But if our fate is, in the end, to be the ultimate refugees, heading into a place where there will be no resettlement camps, assumedly nothing at all, I wonder, too, about the world after me, the one I’ll leave behind when I finally cross that border.

I wonder, too—how could I not with my future life as a “refugee” in mind?—about the **65 million human beings** uprooted from their homes in 2015 alone, largely in places where we Americans have been fighting our wars for this last decade and a half. And it’s hard not to notice how many more have followed in their path this year, **including** at least 80,000 of the Sunni

inhabitants of Iraq's recently "liberated" and partially destroyed city of Fallujah. In the process, tens of millions of them have remained internal exiles in their own country (or what is left of it), while tens of millions have officially become refugees by crossing borders into **Turkey**, **Lebanon**, or **Jordan**, by taking to the seas in flimsy, **overcrowded** craft heading for Greece (from Turkey) or Italy (from Libya) moving onward in waves of desperation, hope, and despair, and **drowning** in alarming numbers. At the end of their journeys, they have sometimes **found** help and **succor**, but often enough only **hostility** and loathing, as if they were the ones who had committed a crime, done something wrong.

I think as well about the nearly 10% of Iraqi children, 1.5 million of them in a country gripped by chaos, war, ethnic conflict, insurgency, and terror who, **according to** a recent UNICEF report, have had to flee their homes since 2014, or the 20% of Iraqi kids (kids!) who are "at serious risk of death, injury, sexual violence, and recruitment into armed groups." I think about **the 51%** of all those refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere who were children, many separated from their parents and alone on Planet Earth.

No child deserves such a fate. Ever. Each uprooted child who has lost his or her parents, and perhaps access to education or any **childhood at all**, represents a crime against the future.

And I think often enough about our response to all this, the one we've practiced for the last 15 years: more bombs, more missiles, more **drone strikes**, more advisers, more **special ops raids**, more weapons deals, and with it all **not success** or victory by any imaginable standard, but only the **further destabilization** of increasing regions of the planet, the further spread of terror movements, and the generation of yet more uprooted human beings, lost children, refugees—ever more, that is, of the terrorized and the terrorists. If this represents the formula from hell, it's also been a proven one over this last decade and a half. It works, as long as what you mean to do is bring chaos to significant swathes of the planet and force yet more children in ever more unimaginable situations.

If you live in the United States, it's easy enough to be shocked (unless, of course, you're a supporter) when Donald Trump calls for the **banning** of Muslims from this country, or Newt Gingrich advocates the **testing** of "every person here who is of a Muslim background and if they believe in **sharia** they should be deported," or various Republican governors **fight** to keep a pitiful few Syrian refugees out of their states. It's easy enough to tsk-tsk over such sentiments, cite a long tradition of American xenophobia and racism, and so on. In truth, however, most of this (however hair-raising) remains bluster at this point. The real "xenophobic" action has taken place in distant lands where the U.S. Air Force **reigns supreme**, where a country that once created the Marshall Plan to raise a continent leveled by war can no longer imagine investing in or creating anything but further **vistas of destruction and destabilization**.

The Muslims that Donald Trump wants to ban are, after all, the very ones his country has played such a part in uprooting and setting in motion. And how can **the few** who might ever make it to this country compare to the **millions** who have flooded Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, among other places, further destabilizing the Middle East (which, in case you forgot, remains the oil heartland of the planet)? Where is the Marshall Plan for them or for the rest of a region that the

U.S. and its allies are now in the process of dismantling (with the eager assistance of the Islamic State, various extremist outfits, Bashar al-Assad, and quite a crew of others)?

What Bombs Can't Build

We Americans think well of ourselves. From **our presidents** on down, we seldom hesitate to imagine our country as a singularly “exceptional” nation—and also as an exceptionally generous one. In recent years, however, that generosity has been little in evidence at home or abroad (except where the U.S. military is concerned). Domestically, the country has split between a rising 1% (and their handlers and enablers) and parts of the other 99% who feel themselves on the path to hell. Helped along by Donald Trump’s political circus, this has given the U.S. the look of a land spinning into something like Third World-ism, even though it **remains** the globe’s “sole superpower” and wealthiest country.

Meanwhile, our professed streak of generosity hasn’t extended to our own infrastructure, which—speaking of worlds swept away by the tides of time—would have boggled the minds of my parents and other Americans of their era. The idea that the country’s highways, byways, bridges, levees, pipelines, and so on could be **decaying** in significant ways and **starved for dollars** without a response from the political class would have been inconceivable to them. And it does represent a strikingly ungenerous message sent from that class to the children of some future America: you and the world you’ll inhabit aren’t worth our investment.

In these years—thank you, **Osama bin Laden**, ISIS, and endless American politicians, officials, military figures, and terror “experts”—fear has gripped the body politic over a phenomenon, terrorism, that, while dangerous, represents one of the **lesser perils** of American life. No matter. There’s a constant drumbeat of discussion about how to keep ourselves “safe” from terrorism in a world in which freelance lunatics with an **assault rifle** or a **truck** can indeed kill startling numbers of people in suicidal acts. The problem is that, in this era, preserving our “safety” always turns out to involve yet more bombs and missiles dropped in distant lands, more troops and special operators sent into action, greater surveillance of ourselves and everyone else. In other words, we’re talking about everything that further militarizes American foreign policy, puts the national security state in command, and assures the continued **demobilization** of a scared and rattled citizenry, even as, elsewhere, it creates yet more uprooted souls, more children without childhoods, more refugees.

Our leaders—and we, too—have grown accustomed to our particular version of eternal “wartime,” and to wars without end, wars **guaranteed to go on** and on as more parts of the planet plunge into hell. In all of this, any sense of American generosity, either of the spirit or of funds, seems to be missing in action. There isn’t the faintest understanding here that if you really don’t want to create generations of terrorists amid a growing population loosed from all the boundaries of normal life, you’d better have a Marshall Plan for the Greater Middle East.

It should be obvious (but isn’t in our American world) that bombs, whatever they may do, can never build anything. You’d better be ready instead to lend a genuine hand, a major one, in making half-decent lives possible for millions and millions of people now in turmoil. You’d better know that war **isn’t actually the answer** to any of this, that if ISIS is destroyed in a region

reduced to rubble and without hope of better, a few years from now that brutal organization could look good in comparison to whatever comes down the pike. You'd better know that peaceful acts—peace being a word that, even rhetorically, has gone out of style in “wartime” Washington—are still possible in this world.

Lost to the Future

Before those tides wash us away, there's always the urge to ensure that you'll leave something behind. I fear that I'm already catching glimpses of what that might be, of the world after me, an American world that I would never have wanted to turn over to my own children or grandchildren, or anyone else's. My country, the United States, is hardly the only one involved in what looks like a growing global debacle of destabilization: a tip of the hat is necessary to the Pakistanis, the Saudis, our European allies, the Brexit British, the Russians, and so many others.

I have to admit, however, that my own focus—my **sense of duty**, you might say—is to this country. I've never liked the all-American words “patriot” and “super-patriot,” which we only apply to ourselves—or those alternatives, “nationalist” and “ultranationalist,” which we reserve pejoratively for gung-ho foreigners. But if I can't quite call myself either an American patriot or an American nationalist, I do care, above all, about what this country chooses to be, what it wants to become. I feel some responsibility for that and it pains me to see what's happening to us, to the country and the people we seem to be preparing to be. We, too, are perhaps beginning to show the strains of the global destabilization now evidently underway and, unnerved, we are undoubtedly continuing to damage the future in ways still hard to assess.

Perhaps someday, someone will have one of my own childhood photo albums in their hands. The glue will have worn off, the photos will be heading toward the central crease, the pages will be flaking away, and the cast of characters, myself included, will be lost to the past, as so many of those children we had such a hand in uprooting and making into refugees will be lost to the future. At that moment, my fate will be the norm and there will be nothing to mourn about it. The fate of those lost children, if they become the norm, will however be the scandal of the century, and will represent genuine crimes against the future.