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The Immorality of Empire

By Nicholas Kramer

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As I watch the popular uprisings unfold against brutal dictatorships supported by my own government, I cannot help but reflect upon the moral implications of my participation in the American empire. My crimes began almost before I can remember, but I will address only the most immediately pertinent of them here. I am a citizen of the United States of America; I pay local, state, and federal taxes; and I vote.

In the summer of 2006, I began working for a United States senator. I soon afterward composed a memo to the senator and sent it to his chief of staff and legislative director for review. The substance of my memo filled all of one typed page and was to the point. I briefly outlined some of the high costs of current U.S. foreign policy, including the expansion of presidential power to the detriment of the Congress and our system of government, damage to America's national security and economy, restriction of civil liberties, and enlargement of the national debt. I then referred back to numerous speeches and press releases put out by my senator in which he stated that the United States could not serve as "the world's policeman" and expressed his dissatisfaction with the high costs of war when the United States had "so many pressing needs here at home." Finally, the memo concluded with my drastic recommendation: in light of his prior statements and policy positions, the senator *might* be interested in having a private briefing regarding the domestic advantages of a more constrained foreign policy (I suggested that this briefing be conducted by [Ivan Eland](#) on his principle of "offshore balancing").

When I was called into my supervisor's office for a chat about my insubordinate behavior (see above), my violation of office politics and my ignorance of the proper hierarchy comprised the

bulk of the scolding. There was almost no mention of the memo's actual subject apart from a brief reference to my complete lack of knowledge about U.S. foreign policy; instead, there was a warning that "it'll be quite a few years before you brief the senator on *anything*."

I think it was then that I sealed my moral fate. After my rebuke, I did the sensible thing: I ignored my conscience and went back to the work of the American empire. Within a year and a half I had been promoted and regularly conducted briefings for the senator. In short, I traded my integrity, values, and, worst of all, my voice in exchange for a slightly less bumpy career path. Meanwhile, people around the world continued to suffer and die by the thousands, and all of it was in my name.

And yes, I use the word "people" deliberately—not extremists, not Muslims, not "suspected enemy fighters," not even "collateral damage," just people like the rest of us. Some of them may have wished us harm, and some may even have been capable of it, but nevertheless they all started out as tiny and helpless as my nine-month-old son is now and went on to live their lives, with all of their trials and tribulations. They cried for their parents as children, had their hearts broken as teenagers, and (if they got that far) emerged into adulthood just as scared and confused as the rest of us. Whatever unique course each of them took through this world, each of their distinct lives ended when they crossed paths with United States foreign policy. They died by bullet, by missile, by sanction, and by the torturer's hand.

And I did nothing. Unlike most Americans, who at least have the comfort of knowing that our entire political process is broken and that nothing they say or do will ever be heard by those who matter, I had the opportunity and indeed the responsibility to speak directly to our elected leaders on behalf of the victims of U.S. foreign policy everywhere—for their good as well as ours. While people died, I was willing to go no further than writing one solitary memo. While people watched as their sons and daughters were murdered in front of their eyes, I closed mine—not in the face of torture or threats to my family, but in the hope of securing a positive recommendation letter and a slightly higher income. And in that moment, the countless victims of the United States government became my victims as well. Not only do I live in an open, democratic society and pay taxes to my government, but I actually participated in my government's decision-making processes at the highest levels. I therefore take full responsibility for each death in which I have had a hand.

Years later, on Dec. 17, 2011, a Tunisian named Mohamed Bouazizi lit himself on fire and burned to death in protest of his government's policies—helping to set off the wave of revolutions now changing the world. Others have followed his example in Egypt, Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal, and Yemen (type in "[self-immolation](#)" into Google News for the latest example). Although I no longer work directly for the American empire through its legislative branch, I still have some moral responsibility for my government's actions, as do all Americans. As such, I must ask myself: while those directly affected by the U.S. empire face down their own governments' tanks, automatic weapons, and fighter jets, what will I do to stop my government? Men and women are burning themselves alive. The question of the morality of empire is not academic—nor is the question of what each of us will do about it.