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Killing America's Kids

Posted By Fred Reed

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The Web is covered in stink today because of a reporter for the Associated Press, Julie Jacobson, who photographed the death of a Marine whose legs had just been blown off. The kid was Joshua Bernard, a lance corporal of 21 years. When the photo appeared, Robert Gates, the secretary of defense [sic] furiously tried to get the AP to quash the photo. It didn't, to its everlasting credit. To quote one of many accounts on the Web:

"Gates followed up with a scathing letter to Curley [of AP] yesterday afternoon. The letter says Gates cannot imagine the pain Bernard's family is feeling right now, and that Curley's 'lack of compassion and common sense in choosing to put out this image of their maimed and stricken child on the front page of multiple newspapers is appalling. The issue here is not law, policy, or constitutional right – but judgment and common decency.'"

I thought a long time before writing about this matter and was not pleasant to be around. The photo resonated with me, as we say. You see, long ago, in another pointless war, promoted by another conscienceless secretary, I too was a Marine lance corporal of 21 years. I too got shot, though not nearly as badly as this kid, and spent a year at Bethesda Naval Hospital. At this point I am legally blind following my (I think) 13th trip to eye surgery as a result of an identical foreign policy.

Big f*cking deal. Sh*t happens. At this point I'm comfortable and doing fine. Don't cry for me, Argentina. The other kid is dead.

BEFORE: Joshua Bernard. Somewhere there is a picture of me, looking almost exactly the same.

But that bothers me. And all of this perhaps gives me a certain insight into the matter that not all reporters have, nor all editors. It also makes me poisonously, bottle-throwing angry to think about another chilly professional bureaucrat, the Second Coming of McNamara, with

less combat experience than Tinkerbell, sending kids to croak in weird places having nothing to do with the U.S.

But Gates. The words "decency" and "unconscionable" coming from him are fetid with hypocrisy. Gates was director of the CIA. "Intelligence" agencies are moral dirt, hated the world over for torture, murder, and destabilization of countries leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths. The KGB, Mossad, CIA, Stasi, SAVAK – they're all the same. A man who presides over torture and murder should not speak of decency. He has none.

Nor is it easy to believe that Gates feels the slightest sympathy for the dead kid or for his family. If you don't want kids to die in Afghanistan, don't send them there. He does. How sorry can he be?

AFTER

It could almost make you turn against the war. Some 6,000 American kids have died like this, the photographs carefully hidden by the press. The Pentagon has killed many, many more Afghan and Iraqi civilians, and the number of permanently disabled Americans is far higher. Today I find a [column](#) on Antiwar.com by Joe Galloway, whom I remember from UPI Saigon, entitled "Afghanistan Isn't Worth One More American Life." I agree. Nor another Afghan life. They did nothing. Another headline notes that the Kondor Legion, the USAF, killed 95 Afghans in another witless air strike. These days, we are the Nazis.

Why then is he so angry at having the war photographed? Easy: Spin control. Spin is so very important in war these days. While America is only barely a democracy, still, if the public, the great sleeping, acquiescent, ignorant beast, ever gets really upset, the war ends. The Pentagon is acutely aware of this. It remembers its disaster in Asia. The generals of today learned nothing military from Vietnam – they are fighting the same kind of war as stupidly as before – but they learned something more important: their most dangerous enemy is the America public. You. Me. Defeating the Taliban isn't particularly important, or even desirable. (No war means fewer promotions and fewer contracts). But while the Taliban cannot possibly defeat the Pentagon, the American public can.

Photographs are death to a war, boys and girls. They can asphyxiate a war faster than roadside bombs can even dream. Gates does not want the sprawling, somnolent, inattentive beast, the public, to see what his wars really are.

In wars, there are many enlightening things to see. For example, the Marine with a third of his face and half a lung, going ku-kuk-kuk as red gunk rolls out of his mouth and he drowns in his blood. Ruined or dying teenagers whimpering the trinity of the badly wounded: mother, wife, and water. The brain-shot guy jerking like an epileptic as he tries not to die. Ever see brain tissue from gunshot? I have. It makes a pink spew across the ground. Like strawberry chiffon.

Gates does not want you to see this. You would puke, buy a bottle of bourbon, and take to the streets. He knows it. CBS could end these wars in a week if it aired what really happens. Gates cannot afford to let the dam break. PR is all. Thus Bush forbade the photographing of coffins coming home, and the CIA ferociously resists the publication of photographs of torture. Professional sadists do things to people that would make you gag.

Then there are the enlisted men. In these hobbyist wars, and to an extent even in peacetime, it is crucial to keep the enlisted from thinking. In some three decades of covering the military, I saw this constantly. If I went to Afghanistan today as a correspondent, I could argue in private about the war with the colonel. If I suggested to the troops that they were being suckered, the colonel would go crazy. Next to keeping the public quiescent, keeping the troops (and potential recruits) bamboozled is vital. If a high-school kid saw what awaited, if he saw the cartilage glistening in wrecked joints, he wouldn't sign.

Do I think that the press should publish such photos? Not yes but hell yes on afterburner. Every time an editor covers for the Pentagon, every time papers refuse to show the charred bodies still... slowly... moving, the dead children, the... never mind. The effect is to ensure that more kids will die the same way. And the press almost always does exactly this. We are a trade of whores and shills. Except that whores give value for money. The press kills our children.

Julie Jacobson sounds like that modern-day rarity, a reporter, as distinguished from a volunteer flack. Bless her. I used to wonder whether women could hack it as combat correspondents. I no longer do. (There are lots of them.) I used to refer to smarmy, over-groomed, bloodthirsty office warts as p*ssies, saying that they lacked balls. The anatomical reference no longer works. I note that Jacobson has more combat time than the aggregate for Bush II, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, Obama, Biden, Gonzales, Clinton, Perle, Abrams, Kristol, Feith, Podhoretz, Krauthammer, George Will, Dershowitz, and Gates. These men, if the word is appropriate, killed that kid. Jacobson just caught them in the act.