

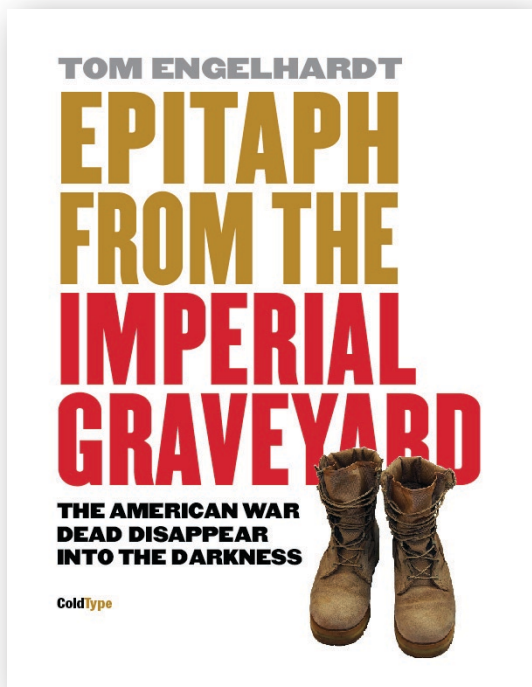
TOM ENGELHARDT

**EPITAPH
FROM THE
IMPERIAL
GRAVEYARD**

**THE AMERICAN WAR
DEAD DISAPPEAR
INTO THE DARKNESS**

ColdType





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EPITAPH FROM THE IMPERIAL RAVEYARD

**THE AMERICAN WAR
DEAD DISAPPEAR
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America's heroes? Not so much. Not anymore. Not when they're dead, anyway. Remember as the invasion of Iraq was about to begin, when the Bush administration decided to seriously enforce a Pentagon ban, in existence since the first Gulf War, on media coverage and images of the American dead arriving home at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware? In fact, the Bush-era ban did more than that. As the *Washington Post's* Dana Milbank wrote then, it "ended the public dissemination of such images by banning news coverage and photography of dead soldiers' homecomings on all military bases."

For those whose lives were formed in the crucible of the Vietnam years, including the civilian and military leadership of the Bush era, the dead, whether ours or the enemy's, were seen as a potential minefield when it came to antiwar opposi-

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Nor were they likely to forget the effect of the “body count,” offered by US military spokesmen in late afternoon press briefings in Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital

tion or simply the loss of public support in the opinion polls. Admittedly, many of the so-called lessons of the Vietnam War were often based on half-truths or pure mythology, but they were no less powerful or influential for that.

In the Vietnam years, the Pentagon had, for instance, been stung by the thought that images of the American dead coming home in body bags had spurred on that era's huge antiwar movement (though, in reality, those images were rare). Nor were they likely to forget the effect of the “body count,” offered by US military spokesmen in late afternoon press briefings in Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital. Among disillusioned reporters, these became known as “the Five O'clock Follies.” They were supposedly accurate counts of enemy dead, but everyone knew otherwise.

In a guerrilla war in which the taking of territory made next to no difference, the

body count was meant as a promissory note against future success. As it became apparent that there would be no light at the end of the tunnel, however, that count began to look ever more barbaric to growing numbers of Americans.

Body Bags and Body Counts

At the time of the first Gulf War, as part of a larger effort to apply the “lessons” of Vietnam, the Pentagon attempted to prevent any images of the American dead from reaching the home front. More than a decade later, top officials of George W. Bush’s administration, focused on ensuring that the invasion of Iraq would be a “cakewalk” and a triumph, consciously played an opposites game with their version of Vietnam. That included, for instance, secretly counting the enemy dead, but keeping mum about them for fear of recreating the dreaded “body count.” General Tommy Franks, who directed the invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq, bluntly insisted, “We don’t do body counts.” But it wasn’t true, and in the end, President Bush couldn’t help himself: his frustration with disaster in Iraq led him to start complaining about being unable to mention how successful US forces were in killing the enemy; finally, compulsively, he began to offer his own presidential body counts.

But an irony should be noted here. There was another lesson from Vietnam which didn’t quite fit with those drawn from body bags and the body count. American troops had been treated terribly by the American public – so went the postwar tale – and particularly by the antiwar movement which reviled them as “baby killers” when they came home and regularly spat upon them. Often ignored in this mythic version of the antiwar movement is the fact that, as the 1970s began, it was being energized



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by significant numbers of Vietnam vets and active duty GI’s. Nonetheless, all this was deeply believed, even by many who had been in that movement, and everyone, whatever their politics, vowed that it would never happen again. Hence, the troops, and especially the dead, were to be treated across the board and in a blanket way as “American heroes,” and elevated to almost god-like status.

So, while President Bush carefully avoided making public appearances at Dover Air Force Base as the coffins were being unloaded (lest someone confuse him with Vietnam-era President Lyndon Johnson), much publicity was given to the way he met privately and emotionally – theoretically beyond the view of the media – with the families of the dead.

In a sense, whatever proscriptions were placed on imagery of the dead, the American dead were all over. For one thing, no sooner did the Bush administration shut down those images than war critics, following their own Vietnam “lessons,” began complaining about his doing so. And even if they hadn’t, every newspaper seemed to have its own “wall of heroes,” those spreads filled with tiny images of the faces of the American dead, while their names were repeatedly read in somber tones on television. Similarly, antiwar activists toured the country with displays of empty combat boots or set up little cemeteries honoring the war dead, even while making the point that they should never have died.

No less significantly, dying Americans were actually news. I mean front-page news. If American troops died in a firefight or thanks to a suicide bomber or went down in a helicopter, it was often in the headlines. Whatever else you knew, you did know that Americans were dying in the wars Washington was fighting in distant lands.

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One November's Dead

Well, that was Iraq, this is Afghanistan. That was the Bush era, these are the Obama years. So, with rare exceptions, the dead rarely make much news anymore.

Now, except in small towns and local communities where the news of a local death or the funeral of a dead soldier is dealt with as a major event, American deaths, often dribbling in one or two at a time, are generally acknowledged in the last paragraphs of summary war pieces buried deep inside papers (or far into the TV news). The American dead have, it seems, like the war they are now fighting, generally gone into the dustbin of news coverage.

Take November in Afghanistan. You might have thought that American deaths would make headline news last month. After all, according to the website icasualties.org, there were 58 allied deaths in that 30-day period, 53 of them American. While those numbers are undoubtedly small if compared to, say, fatal traffic accidents, they are distinctly on the rise. Along with much other news coming out of the planet's number one narco-state, ranging from raging corruption to a rise in Taliban attacks, they trend terribly.

To put those November figures in perspective, if you add up all the Americans who died in Afghanistan in any November from 2001, when the Bush administration launched its invasion, through 2009, you get a total of 59, just six more than last month. Similarly, if you add up American deaths by year from 2001 through 2007, you get 475, as this is being written six more than have died so far in 2010. (Note that these figures don't include deaths categorized by the military as "potential suicides" that might in any way be linked to Afghan tours of duty. There were 19 potential suicides re-



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ported in September and nine in October among soldiers on active duty; 10 in September and 16 in October among reserves not on active duty. November figures have yet to be released.)

Given the modest attention focused on American deaths here in the US, you might almost imagine that, from the Washington elite on down, Americans preferred not to know the price being paid for a war, already in its tenth year (twentieth if you include our first Afghan War of 1980-1989); one that the Obama administration has now agreed to extend through 2014 for US "combat troops" and possibly years beyond for tens of thousands of non-combat trainers and other forces who will be in no less danger.

After all, in two different incidents in November, Afghans turned their weapons on Americans trainers and eight US troops died. (In the past 13 months, this has happened to Western trainers six times.) These stories, too, generally haven't made it off the inside pages of papers.

In understanding how this relative lack of attention is possible, it's worth noting that the American dead tend to come disproportionately from easy-to-ignore tough-luck regions of the country, and disproportionately as well from small town and rural America, where service in the armed forces may be more valued, but times are also rougher, unemployment rates higher, and opportunities less. In this context, consider those November dead. If you look through the minimalist announcements released by the Pentagon, as I did recently, you discover that they were almost all men in their twenties, and that none of them seem to have come from our giant metropolises. Among the hometowns of the dead, there was no Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, or Houston. There were a range of second-level cities including Flagstaff (Arizona), Rochester

(New York), San Jose (California), Tallahassee (Florida), and Tucson (Arizona).

For the rest, from Aroostook, Maine, to Mesquite, Texas, the hometown names the Pentagon lists, whether they represent rural areas, small towns, parts of suburbs, or modest-sized cities, read like a dirge for places you'd never have heard of if you hadn't yourself lived in the vicinity. Here, for instance, are the hometowns of the six US trainers who died in a single incident in late November when a "trusted" Afghan policeman opened fire on them. (Whether he was a Taliban infiltrator or simply a distraught and angry man remains an unanswered, possibly unanswerable, question): Athens (Ohio, pop. 21,909), Beaver Dam (Wisconsin, pop. 15,169), Mexico (Maine, pop. 2,959), Quartz Hill (California, pop. 9,890), Senoia (Georgia, pop. 3,720), Tell City (Indiana, pop. 7,845).

Here, as well, are some, but hardly all, of the other hometowns of the November dead: Chesterfield (Michigan), Chittenango (New York), Conroe (Texas), Dalzell (South Carolina), Davie (Florida), Fort Smith (Arkansas), Freeman (Missouri), Frostburg (Maryland), Greenfield (Wisconsin), Greenwood (Louisiana), Mills River (North Carolina), Pago Pago (American Samoa), Sierra Vista (Arizona), Thomasville (Georgia), and Wyomissing (Pennsylvania).

Back in early 2007, Demographer William O'Hare and journalist Bill Bishop, working with the University of New Hampshire's Carsey Institute, which specializes in the overlooked rural areas of our country, crunched the numbers on the rural dead from America's recent wars. According to their study, the death rate "for rural soldiers (24 per million adults aged 18 to 59) is 60% higher than the death rate for those soldiers from cities and suburbs (15 deaths per million)." Recently, sociologist Katherine Curtis arrived at similar con-



A number of the soldiers who died in November had undoubtedly been in Afghanistan before, probably more than once, and had they lived (and stayed in the military), they would surely have been there again

clusions in a study using data on US troop deaths in Iraq through 2007. There's no reason to believe that much has changed in the last three years.

Keep in mind that a number of the soldiers who died in November had undoubtedly been in Afghanistan before, probably more than once, and had they lived (and stayed in the military), they would surely have been there again. The reason is simple enough: the full weight of the American war state and its seemingly eternal state of war lands squarely on the relatively modest numbers of "volunteers," often from out of the way places, who make up the American fighting force.

The *New York Times's* Bob Herbert, for instance, wrote an October column about an Army Sergeant First Class who died in Afghanistan while on his 12th tour of duty (four in Iraq, eight in Afghanistan). By 2014, had he lived, he could easily have been closing in on 20 tours. As Herbert indicated, he wasn't typical, but multiple tours of duty are now the norm.

In October 2009, six months after the Pentagon rescinded its ban on coverage of the arrival of the war dead, in an obvious rebuke to his predecessor, President Obama traveled to Dover Air Base. There, inside the plane that brought the American dead home, he reportedly prayed over the coffins and was later photographed offering a salute as one of them was carried off the plane. (Eighteen were unloaded that day, including three containing dead agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration.) It was a moving ceremony and, as Byron York, columnist for the conservative *Washington Times*, pointed out not long after, the president wasn't alone. Thirty-five media outlets were there to cover him. Like so much that has had to do with the Obama era, as York also noted, this particular post-Bush version of a

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sunshine policy didn't last long in practice (though the president himself continues to talk about the American war dead).

Now that the dead can be covered, with rare exceptions few seem to care. For those who want to keep a significant American presence in Iraq, continue our war in Afghanistan until hell freezes over, and expand the Global War on Terror (stripped of its name in the Obama years but bolstered in reality), it's undoubtedly more convenient if the dead, like their war, remain in those shadows. In the Bush years, the dead, despite bans, seemed to be everywhere. In the Obama years, except to the wives and children, parents, relatives, friends, and neighbors they leave behind, they seem to have disappeared into the netherworld like the "shadows" we sometimes imagine them to be. In this, they have followed the war in which they fought to a premature graveyard of American inattention.

Early in December, President Obama paid a surprise four-hour visit to American troops (including the wounded) at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, one of the vast American towns-cum-bases that the Pentagon built in that country – in this case, ominously enough, on the ruins of a Russian base from the disastrous Soviet war of the 1980s. There, in an address to the troops, he tiptoed to the edge of Bush-style predictions of victory, assuring "the finest fighting force that the world has ever known" that "you will succeed in your mission."

Be careful what you wish for. In a war in which it costs \$400 a gallon to deliver fuel to an energy-guzzling military at the end of embattled supply lines thousands of miles long, another seven or eight years to a "victory" that leaves the US in control of Afghanistan (Afghanistan!) while paying for a 400,000-man strong, American-trained army and police force, might be the worst



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fate possible.

When it came to an explanation for why we were pursuing such a war so tenaciously over decades, the president simply reiterated the usual: that our goal was never again to let that country "serve as a safe haven for terrorists who would attack the United States of America." These days, when it comes to the "why" question (as in "Why Afghanistan?"), that's about as much as this administration is likely to offer. It seems that explanations, too, and even the need for them have disappeared into the shadows. Today, the true horror of those dead may lie in the fact that Americans aren't even calling for an explanation. It's possible, in fact, that the Afghan War is now being fought largely due to the momentum that a war state in a perpetual state of war builds for itself, but who wants to hear that? After all, that's no way to "support our troops."

The president felt absolutely sure of one thing, though. He told the Americans gathered at Bagram "without hesitation that there is no division on one thing, no hesitation on one thing – and that is the uniformed support of our men and women who are serving in the armed services. Everybody, everybody is behind you, everybody back home is behind you."

Behind them? Maybe. But if so, we're talking way, way behind. Americans may support the troops to the skies, but they are taking no responsibility for the wars into which they are being endlessly recycled until, assumedly, they are used up, wounded, or killed. And by the way, don't hold your breath for the day when some new Maya Lin begins to design an Iraq or Afghanistan Wall. For America's small town "heroes," it's surge and die. A grim epitaph from Afghanistan, that proverbial graveyard of empires.

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