

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

**“America’s Long War
and the Hurt Locker”**

by
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“America’s Long War and the Hurt Locker”

The Reverend Drew Kennedy

In early November, fourteen [American] Chosen [Company] soldiers, twelve Afghan soldiers, a marine, and an Afghan interpreter walked to the nearby village of Aranas, [in the Waygal Valley of eastern Afghanistan. They] met with elders, and then started to walk back. It was a setup. The enemy had built sandbagged positions in a 360-degree circle around a portion of the trail where there was no cover and the only escape was to jump off a cliff. By some miracle, Chosen [company] held them off. Six Americans and eight Afghans were killed and everyone else was wounded. An American patrol hasn’t taken 100 percent casualties in a fire-fight since Vietnam.

We turn into Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Park in front of Abrams Hall, where [Justin] Kalenits lives. We find him in his room smoking and watching television in the dark. His blinds are down and cigarette smoke swirls in the slats of light that come through. I ask Kalenits when was the first moment he realized he was in an ambush, and he says it was when the helmet was shot off his head. Almost immediately he was hit three times in the chest, twice in the back, and then watched his best friend take a round through the forehead that emptied out the back of his head. Kalenits says that when he saw that he just “went into awe.”

There were so many muzzle flashes around them that the hills looked like they were strung with Christmas lights. The rounds that hit Kalenits were stopped by ballistic plates in his vest, but one finally hit him in the left buttock. It shattered his pelvis and tore up his intestines and exited through his thigh. Kalenits was sure it had severed an artery, and he gave himself three minutes to live. He spotted an enemy machine-gun team moving into position on a nearby hill and shot at them. He saw the men fall. He went through all of his ammunition except for one magazine that he saved for when the enemy came through on foot to finish everyone off.

Kalenits started to fade out from lack of blood and he handed his weapon to another man and sat down. He watched a friend named Albert get shot in the knee, and start sliding down the cliff. Kalenits’ team leader grabbed him and tried to pull him back, but they were taking so much fire that it was going to get them both killed. Albert yelled to his team leader to let go and he did, and Albert slid partway down the cliff, losing his weapon and helmet on the way. He finally came to a stop and then got shot three more times where he lay.

Rocket-propelled grenades were exploding all around them and throwing up so much dust that the weapons were jamming. Men were spitting into the breeches of their guns, trying to clear them. For the next hour Kalenits faded in and out of consciousness and the firefight continued as one endless, deafening blur. It finally got dark and the MEDEVAC bird arrived and started hoisting up

the wounded and the dead. There was a dead man in a tree below the trail and dead men at the bottom of the cliff. One body fell out of the Skedco harness as it was being hoisted into the helicopter, and a quick-reaction force that had flown in from Battle Company had to search for him most of the night.

The last thing Kalenits remembered was getting stuck with needles by doctors at the base in Asadabad; the next thing he knew, he was in Germany.¹

II

This is an excerpt from a new book by Sebastian Junger, called *War*. It appeared in the on-line version of *The Wall Street Journal* two weeks ago. I share this harrowing excerpt with you to remind all of us that, every day, whether we remember it or not, we are a nation at war, friends, in both Iraq and especially in Afghanistan. We tend to forget this — and I do, too. We are likely to be much more aware of the tragic BP oil spill in the Gulf, or the vagaries of the stock market, or our plans for Memorial Day. But the fact is that, every day, we are a nation at war.

I would respectfully suggest that we need to more fully own these wars of ours, and remember them, and here's at least one good reason why.

On Memorial Day, each year, we honor the soldiers who died for our country in war — even if we did not, and perhaps do not — support the wars of our time, like the war in Vietnam or the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We may ask why, and we may yearn for a brighter day, but each year it behooves us to stop to honor our fallen soldiers.

Why? Because, as Americans, I would suggest that, implicitly, when our country goes to war, there is a solemn, unspoken, unwritten covenant that the soldiers make with us as American citizens. I've talked about this before on Memorial Day Sunday. It is deceptively simple. Our soldiers say, in effect:

I will risk my life, and I may even die, in a cause I may not fully understand, or even fully agree with. But I will do this because I am an American, and you have asked me to do it. And I've signed up for it.

In return, you must promise me two things: First, you must promise that you will do everything in your power to make sure that it is a war that is worth my life — that it is a war that is worth my dying.

And, second, you must promise never to forget. You must promise never to forget me; you must promise never to forget us. Because, if we die, as Abraham

¹ from *War* by Sebastian Junger, book excerpt, *The Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 2010, found on the Internet.

Lincoln said, we will have given “the last full measure of devotion” for you. So, you must promise never to forget.²

That, I would suggest, is the deceptively simple, unspoken covenant our soldiers make with us.

And that is why, in my judgment, we, as Americans, need to step up and more fully own these wars of ours in Iraq and Afghanistan, especially on this Memorial Day Sunday. Because, again, implicitly, as Americans, we have pledged “never to forget” those who have, and who continue to die on our behalf. *We are connected* to our soldiers, friends.

III

I remind you, too, that there is one full locker of hurt going on in both Iraq and Afghanistan. It may not compare numerically to Vietnam or World War I or II, but there is one full locker of hurt going on, nevertheless.

5,486 American soldiers have died in Iraq and Afghanistan since we invaded Afghanistan in 2001. And each is unique, and counts. “My son, Sgt. Sherwood Baker,” explained one American mother,”

was killed in Baghdad. . . . We are all [connected to] the ever-growing, sad fellowship of families who have met their worst fear when they opened their front door.

“Are you Sherwood Baker’s mother?” said the man with medals on his chest on the rainy night that death came to my door. . . .

“Yes,” I said, and fell to the ground, while some-where outside of myself I heard someone screaming and screaming.³

Arguably, one version or another of this scene has happened over 5,000 times here in America in recent years, and over 150,000 times, or maybe 500,000 times, or even 700,000 times in Iraq and Afghanistan. (Iraqi deaths are estimated from a low of 57,000 people to a high of 1.3 million people, depending on whose sources we consider most reliable. But everyone agrees it’s a lot of people, and most of these are innocent civilians.)

² I am indebted here to my colleague the Reverend Davidson Loehr, as I have roughly paraphrased this two part “covenant” from Loehr’s work: “Remembering Those Who Fought For Us,” November 11, 2001, First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, Texas, www.austinuu.org, pp. 2-3.

³ Zappala, Celeste, as quoted in Wallis, Jim, *The Great Awakening*, p. 242.

Those are the dead. The number of American soldiers *wounded* in Iraq and Afghanistan ranges from a low of about 37,000 Americans to a high of over 100,000 Americans, depending on what one considers to be a “wound.”

“Wounds” are not necessarily counted among those who have had to pick up their friends in pieces or, like Justin Kalenits in our excerpt from Sebastian Junger’s new book, who watched his best friend take a round through the forehead. Likewise, “wounds” are not necessarily counted among those who have fired – perhaps in a panic – into a moving car, only to discover a shattered innocent Iraqi family a few minutes later.

Those are the dead and wounded overseas.

Here at home, a new report released just last month, and reported in the military’s own *Army Times*, reveals some astonishing and disturbing statistics, namely, that 18 of our American veterans – of all ages and deployments, not just in Iraq and Afghanistan -- kill themselves *every single day*. On average, actually 30 try to commit suicide every day, but only a little over half (18) succeed. Still, either way, this is scandalous, and so sad. Indeed, there are 950 suicide attempts each month by veterans who are receiving some type of treatment from the Veterans Affairs Department.⁴

Among veterans, the struggle to return to everyday life once they’ve been to war has been well documented for years. To cite just one more statistic, in 2007, the Associated Press reported that one in four of our homeless Americans across the nation is likely a veteran, including an increasing number of young women.

So, friends, I remind you that there is one full locker of hurt going on in connection with our ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of it is going on overseas, and some of it is going on right here at home.

IV

While good people may honestly disagree about such things – and in this church it is critically important that we remember that – before our invasion of Iraq in 2003, I warned that what I regarded as the rush to war in Iraq, in my judgment, was immoral and wrong. In sermons and press conferences, here and elsewhere, I argued that a pre-emptive war with Iraq would be “recklessly unnecessary, needlessly expensive, and horrifically costly in terms of lives and in terms of American prestige.”

I so wish I had been wrong.

That was over seven years ago.

⁴ “18 veterans commit suicide each day,” by Rick Maze, staff writer for *Army Times*, posted Monday, April 26, 2010, found on the Internet.

Similarly – and, again, I remind you that within this church community good people may honestly disagree about such things – but, nevertheless, it is with considerable reluctance that I again come out against our president, this time President Barack Obama, in opposing our continued military presence in Afghanistan – as well as in Iraq.

In doing so, I want to plainly acknowledge that I agree that violent expressions of Islamic radicalism and Jihadism, such as al Qaeda, are a very real threat, and are not just a nuisance or a petty annoyance that we can afford to naively ignore. Al Qaeda is a serious and deadly threat to the United States.

However, I am now persuaded that our mission in Afghanistan is seriously flawed – and should be abandoned. After all, al Qaeda is not even *in* Afghanistan anymore. They're in Pakistan. They're in Yemen. They're in Somalia. They may be in Brooklyn or even here in Milwaukee. They can be anywhere, because al Qaeda is a transnational movement. So, transforming Afghanistan – because Afghanistan is where al Qaeda *used* to be – will clearly *not* prevent another 9/11.

I come to the conclusion that our mission in Afghanistan is seriously flawed and should be abandoned after following the news carefully since President Obama's extensive review of the situation in Afghanistan last fall and his announcement last December 1 of the increase (the surge) in troops there. I applaud President Obama's attempt to redefine the purposes and nature of military engagement in Afghanistan, but I still find it seriously flawed.

I have been reading, and listening to a wide range of different voices. I am especially taken with Professor Andrew Bacevich. Bacevich is a professor of International Relations and History at Boston University. He is also a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, having served in the Army for 23 years and finishing as a colonel. He has taught at West Point. Additionally, Colonel Bacevich earned his Ph.D. in American Diplomatic History from Princeton. So, Bacevich, in other words, is a student *both* of the military and of diplomatic history. And that's a combination I like.

Bacevich argues that a better way to proceed against violent expressions of Islamic radicalism, such as al Qaeda, is to regard such lethal threats as serious criminal conspiracies, somewhat like the way we regard the Mafia. So, if groups like al Qaeda are regarded as seriously dangerous and violent criminal conspiracies, then the appropriate response is not wholesale invasion and war, but appropriately targeted international policing, through such agencies as the F.B.I., the C.I.A., Interpol, and perhaps certain special operations forces.

This, it seems to me, would be a better way. It would create fewer enemies, save hundreds of billions of dollars better used at home, and arguably it would vastly improve our international relations.

V

All across America, Memorial Day will likely be celebrated in the usual ways this year. But if I had my way, I would remind our fellow Americans that we are a *nation*, not just a *military*, at war — as we *have* been for nine years in Afghanistan, and seven years in Iraq — making these two of the longest wars in American history. And we have one painfully full locker of hurt going on, both overseas and here at home, because of these wars.

So, friends, I believe it is time to bring our soldiers home.