

Letters on "boot camps" for youth

10 July 2001

Dear Editor,

Thank you for your article exposing the brutality and stupidity of the latest fad in punishment for teenagers in trouble: "boot camps." I have a special interest in this story for a couple of reasons: (1) I was in the US Army myself for 4 years, the first couple of months of which time being spent at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, in "Basic Training," and (2) I live in South Dakota and thus have heard a lot about the Gina Score death and how my state's "boot camps" (there is one for girls in Plankinton and one for boys at Custer) are run.

One of the main rationales given in support of boot camps by their proponents is the idea that the way this nation's military trains its recruits has the side benefit of making them more mature and responsible—in short, better citizens. My state's governor, Bill Janklow, credits the US Marines with having "turned [his] life around."

The main problem with kids who get in trouble, this argument goes, is that they lack "respect" (for the rights of others, for social institutions and for "authority") and self-discipline. These kids are too maladapted to be helped by counseling, they need to be shocked into the right mindset, say boot camp fans. The problem with this idea is that our military services do not create better citizens or psychologically healthier individuals.

Soup kitchens, homeless shelters, jails and other such repositories for society's "losers" see disproportionate numbers of veterans, most of these never having even been close to combat situations. Why is that the case? I believe that it is because our military institutions socialize their members in such a way that they are less capable of handling the stress and strain of normal, everyday life. The primary objective of military-style training is to make people obey orders without regard for either their own physical safety, or the objective morality of whatever it is that they are being told to do (e.g.: "Go over there and kill that complete stranger who has never harmed or threatened you"). This objective is achieved, initially, by an intense program of depersonalization, otherwise known as "boot camp" (or "basic training," depending on one's branch of service). The "ideal" graduate of a military branch's boot camp is an individual in a dissociative state, awaiting

orders—capable of killing on command.

It seems logical to me that if the kids who are subjected to the boot camp experience are changed at all by the experience, it will be mostly for the worse. How will kids who have had the ability to say "no" to authority psychologically (and physically) beaten out of them be able to resist pressure to join gangs (gang life is the closest thing there is to being in the military in the everyday lives of most "at risk" kids) once out of boot camp?

Of course, the real impetus behind the boot camp fad is simple vengeance. Our society wants to make "bad" kids suffer and, at the same time, be able to tell itself that the punishment the kids are receiving is "for their own good." Another aspect of the boot camp phenomenon that should disturb people is that the kids who are sent to such places are mostly poor and minority. Even in South Dakota, which is over 90 percent white, a majority of the "trainees" in our boot camps are minorities (mostly Native American).

Boot camps, along with the rest of the "criminal justice system," serve to remind the poor and minority populations of their place in society. Kids from "good homes" who have trouble with the law, like Jenna and Barbara Bush, are not sent to boot camps.

With respect to Gina Score's death, your article mentions the general complaints that have been made about the system and how it operates. I think it would be edifying for your readers to know more specifically how Gina Score ended up dead at the girls' boot camp in Plankinton, South Dakota.

Gina Score was a morbidly obese teenager: she was 5'4" and weighed over 250 pounds. The first morning she was at the girls' boot camp she was forced to participate in a 3 mile run. It was a hot, muggy June morning. She got over-heated and told her drill instructors that she would not be able to finish the run. She was told that she had no choice and was prodded and cajoled into running further. Finally, Gina Score collapsed on the ground. Drill instructors and other staff accused her of "faking" heat exhaustion and did nothing to help her, in fact they stood over her for more than two hours and mocked her, drinking soft drinks—denying her shade or water. In the end, her lips turned blue, she frothed at the mouth and died.

LG

Sioux Falls, SD

7 July, 2001

Thanks for the article detailing some of the horrors of boot camps in the United States.

In South Africa, a private centre run by Christian fundamentalists for the supposed rehabilitation of drug addicts has hit the headlines several times in the past few months after the death of two youths. The centre, which is run on the “tough love” principles mentioned in the WSWs article, runs a “punishment camp” for those who won’t bow to the discipline inflicted by the pastor who runs the centre. The first death occurred after a youth had been chained to a cage all night at the punishment camp. The circumstances surrounding the second death are not clear and it is still being investigated. Further tales of horrific abuse have continued to emerge from previous inmates of the centre. Savage beatings, the setting of pit bull terriers on youngsters, and verbal and psychological abuse are blended with a Christian fundamentalism of the most retrograde kind.

As governments continue to roll back social services, we can expect to see a proliferation of such institutions. In the United States, President Bush’s plan to hand over government responsibilities to “faith-based” groups will certainly lead to more deaths of youngsters at the hands of the advocates of “tough love”

Yours,

EG

South Africa

6 July 2001

Dear editor,

Your article on boot camps in the USA reveals a disturbing confusion in their proponents between discipline and cruelty.

To force a child to experience the humiliations that were described in the article has nothing to do with discipline, but plenty to do with a depraved and even lascivious exercise of power over another for the sheer sake of that exercise.

Rather than provide discipline, the abuses that seem to be perpetrated in such camps would tend, I consider, to increase problems rather than ameliorate them. If discipline is to have any benefit it has to be in a context of respect for the person (all persons, including “inmates”) and an exhibition of care, not the disrespect and exhibition of what amounts to torture.

How is a young woman, for instance, going to learn to respect herself (the first step for respecting others) by being “strip-searched” by males? This is a tacit rape and should be subject of criminal sanctions against the perpetrators.

Regards,

DG

Sydney, Australia

8 July, 2001

To the WSWs:

The people who own this country have been killing children overseas and in our inner cities for so long through “international order” and “law and order” policies that it only stands to reason that they would eventually begin—and then justify—the torture and murders of young people in the boot camps.

As a teacher who has spent five years now working with young people grown up in a culture of “tough love,” I can attest that “tough love” policies of business, church and state accomplish very little beyond destruction of the imagination. Many teachers in this city (New York) will tell you that the problems we encounter in the public schools have less to do with the “unteachable” qualities of a generation than they do the fact that, in a culture that is coming to regard education as a process in which one acquires the “right” answers for a test, the natural curiosity of youth and learning are reduced to a joyless encounter between teaching “professionals” and students.

Add to this underfunded and overworked mess, the tendency of the boojwah dictatorship to encourage chemical dependency among adults and youth who feel a natural dissatisfaction with the blind consumption and production wheel, and we have the situation we now face in public education.

The “boot camp” is a natural consequence of a brutal society that, in its quest for higher and higher levels of profit, has lost sight of the key reason for technological innovation to begin with, i.e., the extra time and space technology *theoretically* allows us for self-exploration.

The question, as Rosa Luxemburg phrased it all those years ago, is one of socialism or barbarism.

The news wires today crackle with images of the Bush Dynasty, father and son, entertaining themselves sitting in a golf cart, waving their clubs at the camera. The consummate political idiots, the pinnacle of capitalist civilization in fools’ cap and bells. The expression on the Bush faces, elder and younger, is one that may be witnessed on the features of a Labrador retriever chasing a tennis ball. The “game” of the moment is everything for such hardy jackasses and their disciples; a recreation that does not even *re-create*.

The future is the dictatorship of the proletariat, or there is no future for humanity or anything else.

MHP

New York City

8 July, 2001



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