

US soldiers' stories: The terrible cost of Washington's wars

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The “letter of reconciliation” to the Iraqi people written by two recent Army veterans and their subsequent public statements point to deepening opposition among American working people and within the ranks of the US military itself to the continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Josh Stieber and Ethan McCord, both US Army specialists who got out of the military last year, were moved to write their letter following the release of the so-called “collateral murder” videotape by WikiLeaks, portraying a July 2007 massacre in the streets of Baghdad.

The two men were both members of the company that was on the ground that day, and McCord was among the first to arrive at the scene of carnage left by strafing from an Apache helicopter. Finding among its victims two wounded young children, he attempted to rescue them, only to face disparagement and ridicule from his superiors.

The events graphically portrayed in the WikiLeaks tape—which the Pentagon had strenuously sought to suppress—are indeed horrific, offering many their first view of the bloodletting that is routinely censored from the coverage of the US mass media.

Equally if not more appalling is the “chatter” from the US helicopter crew, which gloats over killing unarmed civilians, begs to be allowed to fire on the wounded and dismisses the wounding of young children as the fault of their father for bringing them into a “battle zone”—i.e., their own neighborhood.

In addition to taking responsibility for their part in this and similar incidents and beseeching forgiveness from the people of Iraq, the two US veterans have sought to make additional vital points about what millions have witnessed in the leaked video.

First, they insist that the carnage captured in the tape was not an aberration, but rather representative of “everyday occurrences” in Iraq and illustrated “how US-led wars are carried out in this region.”

That is, it was the inevitable outcome of a colonial-style occupation and rules of engagement in which the entire population is viewed as real or potential enemies.

Secondly, they confront the understandable—but all too complacent—reaction of many who have viewed the video and reacted by branding those involved as unfeeling monsters.

Their monstrous acts, the soldiers insist, were again not aberrant, but rather the desired result of systematic training and discipline that is designed to make US troops kill without question or acknowledged feelings.

While the two veterans personally involved in the action have appealed for forgiveness and taken responsibility for “our part in the deaths and injuries of your loved ones,” the official reaction in Washington has been one of steadfast defense of the massacre combined with denunciations and threats against those who leaked the video.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who headed the Pentagon under George W. Bush, when the massacre took place and remains at his post, having been reappointed by Barack Obama, justified the actions depicted in the video, including the machine-gunning of wounded civilians and those who tried to come to their aid, a patent war crime.

American soldiers, Stieber and McCord state in their letter, are, like the people of Iraq themselves, victims of the wars launched by Bush and continued under Obama.

For the Iraqi people, the war has meant a catastrophe of historic dimensions: more than a million lives lost, millions more turned into refugees and the wholesale destruction of the country's economy and infrastructure.

Nearly 4,400 US military personnel have lost their lives in Iraq, with another 1,051 having been killed in Afghanistan. Approximately 37,000 troops have been wounded in the two wars, many of them suffering grievous head injuries, loss of limbs and other severe physical trauma that, in an earlier period with less advanced medical technology, would have resulted in death.

Meanwhile, young soldiers and Marines compelled to endure multiple tours of duty occupying Iraq and Afghanistan and confronting their largely hostile populations are showing ever-greater signs of severe mental trauma.

According to one report issued last year by the Pentagon-connected think tank, the Rand Corporation, at least 300,000 veterans of the two wars are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Meanwhile, the rate of suicides among these troops has more than doubled since the outset of Washington's “war on terrorism” in 2001.

Those returning from these wars to a country that has been

economically and socially devastated by the capitalist economic crisis are finding it increasingly difficult to reintegrate themselves into civilian society. Their unemployment rate approaches 15 percent—more than 50 percent higher than the national average—while homeless shelters are reporting a growing number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans among their clients.

The military's response to this mental health crisis has been to stigmatize soldiers seeking assistance and to mask underlying problems with a steady diet of prescription drugs.

This epidemic of mental and emotional problems is bound up with the very nature of the wars. Young soldiers pumped up with patriotic rhetoric about defending America from terrorism and "liberating" the Iraqi or Afghan people are thrown into oppressed countries in which there is no clear idea of whom they are fighting and in which the victims of US firepower are more likely to be unarmed civilians, including women and children, than so-called "insurgents."

The lies used to promote these wars and the deliberately dehumanizing training used by the military to inure soldiers to death and suffering only go so far.

In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Josh Stieber described this process, recalling being made to sing marching cadences during his training that included lines about slaughtering women and children. "You hear a song like that one day, and then you hear a chaplain blessing what you're doing the next day. And then you have people back home writing that you're protecting them and helping them. You can get all caught up in it, and it can definitely mess with your psychology."

He described the near-universal disillusionment of the troops in Iraq: "Just about everybody I knew said that what we were doing was at the very least a waste of time. Some of them went further to say that it was morally wrong, and some people went so far as to say that if the same thing was being done in their country that they themselves would become insurgents." In the end, he added, the troops' sole motivation was "making it home alive."

Ethan McCord was more explicit about the personal toll taken by his experience in Iraq, describing the scene shown in the WikiLeaks video as one that is "burned" into his head, which he relives almost every day.

"When I close my eyes, I see what happened that day and many other days like a slide show in my head," he told the WSWS. "The smells come back to me. The cries of the children come back to me. The people driving this war machine, they don't have to deal with this. They live in their \$36 million mansions and sleep well at night."

Indeed, the burden of these experiences, multiplied by the hundreds of thousands, is being born by troops drawn largely from the working class as well as their families, friends and communities all across America.

For those in whose interests these wars are being fought, the

Wall Street bankers, corporate executives, the wealthy and their political servants in both Democratic and Republican parties, the soldiers are just a disposable commodity, to be thrown on the scrap heap when they can no longer cope with combat.

Both soldiers expressed disappointment but no real surprise that Obama, having run as a self-styled critic of Bush's wars, is continuing them both, while dramatically escalating the US intervention in Afghanistan.

"It seems that so much of it gets back down to money and how entrenched different corporations and businesses are in the political process," said Josh Stieber. "When profits become a bigger priority than people, it's a recipe for disaster."

Ethan McCord told the WSWS: "It's not Republican or Democrat; it's money. There's something else lying underneath it where Republicans and Democrats together want to keep us in Iraq and Afghanistan."

This essential insight is becoming more and more widespread among working people and among the US troops themselves, even as the professional protesters of the so-called antiwar movement, whose orientation was always to the Democratic Party, have largely closed up shop in deference to the Obama administration.

Genuine and decisive opposition to war will emerge as part of a renewed movement of the working class, which is bearing the costs of the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, even as it is being forced to pay for the economic crisis and the bailout of the capitalist financial sector that created it.

The Obama administration is determined to continue and escalate these wars on behalf of the social layer that he represents, the corporate and financial elite. He is doing so in the face of mass popular opposition that is increasingly rooted in an understanding that the wars abroad are being fought to defend the same big-money interests that are responsible for the destruction of jobs, living standards and basic rights at home. This path can lead only to political and social upheavals.

The fight to end war can be waged successfully only on the basis of a perspective for mobilizing the working class politically in struggle against the capitalist profit system, which is the source of militarism.

This movement of the working class must be armed with a socialist and internationalist program that includes the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and for holding accountable those in both the Bush and Obama administration who are responsible for these criminal wars of aggression.



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