

Sexual violence and abuse in the US military

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The slap on the wrist administered Thursday to US Army Brigadier General Jeffrey Sinclair, originally accused of sexual assault charges punishable by life in prison, was predictable and entirely in line with the character and policies of the American military. Under the plea deal, the more serious charges against Sinclair, that he raped and threatened to kill a female captain under his command, 20 years his junior, over the course of three years, were dropped.

The military court's ludicrous sentencing of the brigadier general, a former top commander in Afghanistan, to pay a small fine was not an aberration, a mistake or the result of a misunderstanding. The abuse and mistreatment of soldiers, female and male, emerges from a culture of imperialist aggression and, in fact, is part of the training and preparation of the US military for its role at home and abroad.

The drive of the American ruling elite to conquer the entire planet by military means, of which the current campaign against Russia over Ukraine is only the latest manifestation, must intensify the effort to inure the members of the US armed forces to committing unspeakable acts of violence.

According to many studies and surveys, sexual violence against women (and to a lesser extent, men) is pervasive in the US armed forces, as well as its military academies. The Department of Defense estimates that there were some 26,000 incidents of sexual assault and unwanted sexual contact in 2012, with only 10 percent or so having been reported. Virtually no serious punishment is ever meted out.

In 2011, a lawsuit was filed by two male and 15 female veterans claiming that the Department of Defense permitted a military culture that failed to prevent rape and sexual assault and that then Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates and his predecessor, Donald H. Rumsfeld, "ran institutions in which perpetrators were promoted and where military personnel openly mocked and flouted the modest Congressionally mandated institutional reforms."

The prevalence of such criminal behavior in the US

military is hardly a secret. Scandal after scandal has erupted in the past decade or more, especially since the US Air Force Academy sexual assault scandal in 2003. In a number of cases, charges have been laid against officers with responsibility for sexual assault prevention!

If the Pentagon's frequent promises of a "crackdown" against sexual violence, along with the creation of military task forces and increased self-regulation, have come to nothing, or less than nothing (the three US military academies reported a marked increase in reported sexual assaults for the school year 2010 to 2011), then the problem must be endemic and institutional.

As the German socialist Karl Liebknecht explained in his classic, *Militarism & Anti-Militarism* (1907), mistreatment *within* the armed forces, "the horrors of the barracks," is "an indispensable auxiliary" to and "an illegal but necessary method of military education."

In other words, whatever its official rules provide for, the military high command finds that ill-treatment of soldiers "is nevertheless probably the most effective of all coercive means of discipline used by militarism. There is an attempt to tame men in the way in which beasts are tamed. Recruits are drugged, confused, flattered, bribed, pressed, locked up, disciplined and beaten. Thus grain upon grain is mixed and kneaded to serve as mortar for the great edifice of the army."

Aside from a psychopathic minority, members of the armed forces are not automatically or even easily suited for murderous operations. They have to be psychologically broken, their hearts and souls hardened, or torn out, and unthinking obedience to superiors and "the flag" instilled. The goal is to turn the individual into the impervious Full Metal Jacket of Stanley Kubrick's film.

Moreover, one must also take into account the dehumanizing and demoralizing impact on US military personnel of continual war in the Middle East and Central Asia for more than a decade, with some individuals having been deployed to war zones in Iraq or Afghanistan six or eight, even ten times. The physical and mental

strain is staggering, reflected not only in belligerent acts against others, but in the number of suicides or attempted suicides.

The violent treatment inflicted on women in the military, a phenomenon unknown in Liebknecht's day, is an extension of this internal process of "military education," applied to the most vulnerable portion of the armed forces. In this way, the military teaches its enlistees to be impervious to human pain and suffering, readying them for criminal operations against hostile peoples abroad and the working class at home.

In any event, this is not a matter of predicting the future, but an ongoing reality. Operating with the full cooperation of the American media, which only reports what absolutely cannot be suppressed, the US military has carried out atrocity after atrocity in Iraq and Afghanistan, the vast majority of those unpunished. The aim of the systematic brutality is to terrorize and intimidate the populations into submission.

The photos of Abu Ghraib, which captured US troops enthusiastically carrying out acts of sexual sadism and torture, were only the tip of the iceberg. Here was the outcome of "successful" military training: backward, mentally impoverished individuals encouraged to see the "enemy," the Iraqi populace, as inhuman and worthy of being treated as animals.

As war veteran Josh Stieber told the WSWS in 2010, acts such as those captured in the infamous Baghdad "collateral murder" video posted by WikiLeaks, were "not out of the ordinary in Iraq;" on the contrary, they were everyday occurrences.

The pervasive climate of violence and abuse in the military is not an isolated phenomenon. It is a crystallized expression of social conditions in the US, which are characterized, above all, by the immense gap between the super-rich and the rest of the population.

To defend itself from the inevitable social storm to come, the wealthy elite in America has built up a vast police-state apparatus. Its authoritarian measures extend from massive and illegal NSA spying to "everyday" repression and murder by state and local police, immigration and border authorities and the vast army of private security personnel. US capitalism already resembles an armed camp, aimed at the constitutional rights and social conditions of the mass of the population.

Accompanying that is the all too common glorification of the military and police (along with the more general porno-sadistic trends, etc.) in film, television, video games and the rest of popular culture, and the public

celebration of these forces on every possible occasion. No major sports event, for example, can now be held in the US without honoring "our heroes in uniform." American military forces have become officially "heroic" in proportion to the global nature, bestiality and unpopularity of their operations.

Liebknecht's pamphlet, written only a few years before the outbreak of World War I, might have been written yesterday: "Militarism also makes its appearance as a system which saturates the whole public and private life of the people with the militaristic spirit. The Church, the school, and a certain tendency to cheapness in art, together with the press, a wretched, venal rabble of *littérateurs*, and the social nimbus which surrounds 'our glorious war army' like a halo—all these work together in a tenacious and cunning manner."

The reference to the First World War should come as a warning. The buildup of immense military might and its endless glorification are not taking place for nothing. The American ruling elite, in its desperate crisis, sees enemies everywhere and is making sinister plans to deal with them, abroad and here at home.

The fight against sexual violence in the armed forces and militarism as a whole involves rejecting the lies "democratic" American capitalism tells about itself and taking up the struggle for a socialist alternative. As Rosa Luxemburg, killed with her comrade Liebknecht by the German military in 1919, once wrote, "To abandon the struggle against the military system amounts in fact to the same thing as renouncing the struggle against the present social order in general."



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