

“Over the years I kept seeing people I knew get killed and I came to ask myself, ‘Who benefits?’”

US military veteran speaks on Afghan debacle

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This reporter recently interviewed Sean, a US Army veteran in his mid-30s, about the fall of Kabul, the changing attitude of soldiers to American militarism and the social crisis within the United States.

WSWS: The corporate media are howling that the Taliban is sitting on a trillion dollars’ worth of minerals and that the treatment of women will deteriorate, among other concerns. How do these pronouncements mesh with the original reason for the invasion, i.e., to prevent another 9/11 and build democracy?

S: It is certainly a morphing of the narrative. They do it without even blinking an eye. I was ranting to my wife about this earlier, but if they were so concerned about women’s rights why did they support the mujahideen in the first place in the 80s?

WSWS: Did you start to have questions about American involvement in Afghanistan when you were in the service?

S: Yes, when I was a unit armorer sitting on all of this unused equipment, I was still seeing requisitions go through for new equipment for our unit even though the decision had already been made to take us offline, to stand-down our unit. We were going to shut down but we were still purchasing gear. I really couldn’t square that; I had to change my assessment of what was going on. I was seeing my friends go fight and die and I was seeing their mission—which I didn’t believe in anymore—it was just an excuse to send money to contractors for goods we didn’t need. I kept thinking about the money. I was deeply disgusted about the whole thing, completely disillusioned.

Over the years I kept seeing people I knew get killed and I came to ask myself, “who benefits?” The weapons manufacturers and the people who represent their interests in the government, those groups benefit, but what gets ground up in that mechanism are me and my friends in the poor rural South, or anywhere else where the military seemed like the only option. And meanwhile we’re going back to these communities with health crises and terrible infrastructure, and it seems like we aren’t benefiting at all.

WSWS: Did your family have military experience?

S: Some. My uncles never talked about it much, but the rest of my family held them up as these people with economic stability, and that the stability came from being soldiers.

WSWS: What was your reaction to Biden’s admission that the mission in Afghanistan had nothing to do with so-called nation-building?

S: To hear the president say that it was never about nation building really flies in the face of our stated mission; they told us that we were equipping the people of Afghanistan to fight their own battles and in doing so they would be creating a barrier against the Taliban and ipso facto we would all be better off in America because the Taliban couldn’t extend into a region where historically they had a lot of control. And that to me seems like a verbose way of saying nation-building.

I have friends who have gone either way about the news from Kabul. Some of them have become really disgusted and they have reached out to

antiwar organizations. And I have friends who have been in longer who have doubled down on the rhetoric, especially to deal with the loss, because there is a lot of loss for a combat soldier. For some of them it was very hard to deal with.

WSWS: Can you speak to the changing mood among soldiers you know?

S: A lot of those guys really believed in what we were told the mission was originally. We had heard stories about Taliban repression and violence. We thought that at the very least we were saving the Afghan people somehow.

And now it’s just shock. One of my good friends has been posting different articles along the general theme of “why did my buddy die?” That’s a phrase I keep seeing a lot. All of us are still processing it but for some it’s very big. It’s like having your primary motivation for risking life and limb just suddenly and finally dispelled.

After so much personal tragedy for so many of these guys, many want to just shut down the entire “anti-terrorism” mission internationally. A lot of them have turned to the Facebook group About Face. If you want to see a lot of the veterans going to the antiwar school of thought, you can see it there. It’s people speaking out. They draw the parallel between Kabul and Saigon. I’ve seen the membership of groups like that grow tremendously. Guys I never thought I would see running with groups like that, E-6s and E-7s with lots of experience and from up the chain of command, people who have been to Afghanistan multiple times, I just never thought I’d see it.

WSWS: That seems like a major change of heart.

S: Absolutely. There is a mindset that is pervasive in combat arms. You are there to locate, close with and destroy the enemy. For these guys to join antiwar groups, this represents a tremendous shift. Some of them are Trump guys even.

WSWS: Presumably they would not have protested in 2003 against the invasion of Iraq, now their idea of American military involvement has changed.

S: That’s right. I’m glad you brought up the Iraq war. The Army friends I am referring to were kids when they saw it starting and did not oppose it. These guys started to feel outrage when the Iraqi Defense Forces they had trained would switch uniforms and join ISIS. There was outrage about that. Now that it’s happened in Afghanistan it has really punched it for a lot of them.

WSWS: Can you comment on the trillions spent on the war in Afghanistan? I believe it’s \$2.5 trillion to date but more than double that when you count interest payments on the borrowed money.

S: Yes, absolutely. I joined in about 2012 and shortly after that I got injured and became a unit armorer. I maintained weapon systems for my company. I was in charge of equipment that added up to hundreds of millions of dollars. Whenever my colleagues deployed, they only took

with them a tiny fraction of what we had been maintaining for them. Stateside, I was sitting on hundreds of millions of dollars of unused equipment. I have seen military spending soar and I know personally that that money does not go toward anything that would help combat troops. The money is being wasted and only a tiny fraction of the equipment gets used. Trillions of dollars in military spending in Afghanistan clearly are not the answer.

WSWS: What would \$2 trillion do stateside?

S: Where I'm from it's very rural. Since the turn of the 21st century rural manufacturing in the South has dried up. In the Carolinas when I was growing up it was very difficult, pretty much impossible, to get a factory job with benefits. And at the same time—sorry, let me start over because thinking about all the money in Afghanistan is very upsetting, let me start over.

So, where I'm from in rural Carolinas, in my parents' generation it was typical to get out of high school, get a factory job and sort of get on with it. You could eventually be a supervisor. Once there you could pursue home ownership and start a family. When I was growing up, certainly since 2001, manufacturing has dried up with nothing to replace it. There's some on the outskirts of Gastonia or Shelby [North Carolina] or places like that. But in the rural county where I'm from there's no real opportunity. So, the military is seen uniformly as the best option. You could try to get good grades and go to college but even as I was growing up, we had started to see the myth exploded about getting a college degree as a guarantee for high income. So, for a lot of guys and girls the military was the best option. Go into the military and get your college paid for. I was courted by different recruiters in high school dangling these scholarships. Anyone who was an A-student was getting calls from military recruiters. Our parents talked about mill closures, defunct factories that had been there for decades, so growing up in the middle part of North Carolina it looked bleak, and the military seemed like the only sure thing.

WSWS: WSWS has covered how the infrastructure in the Carolinas is in such terrible shape and a hurricane can quickly become a deadly event and an environmental disaster, with coal ash and hog farm runoff getting into the water. Can you speak about social spending and public health in light of the cost of the Afghan war?

The rank-and-file committee is independent of the pro-corporate UAW, so that workers can organize their own struggle.

S: I don't know if it's a cliché but certainly where I am from when the mills left decades ago crime took off. Methamphetamine took off in the early 2000s. People could manufacture it in their homes. The Carolinas are a place where addicts find themselves in prison, instead of rehab. Any money for rehabilitation would make tremendous strides in saving money on prisons. We have diabetes and poor nutrition. Any money for nutrition or education, you can go a very long way with a very small amount of social spending in the Carolinas. It's the same with the opioid crisis. Members of my family have struggled with opioid addiction, and they've been to prison and the state just treats them like criminals. In my opinion what was done *to them* is criminal. It's just really sad and unfortunate.

WSWS: What are your living conditions like?

Growing up we were farmers primarily but my mom worked at a temp agency after the mills left and labor lost all of its power. My dad was a machine operator in a transnational plastic manufacturer. We got by. I was really fortunate growing up because I worked night shifts at a furniture factory when I was a teenager, so I had a little money for things.

WSWS: And now, here in Virginia?

S: I switched to food service for years and a little bit of retail. Both of those sectors do better in the city. I haven't been working much since the start of COVID. My wife was pregnant and had our son early in the pandemic. He was born early and immunocompromised initially so we couldn't risk going out. We both lost our jobs. My wife has health

complications, mobility issues, so the pandemic has been really, really hard on us. We both work in industries that we were essentially driven into by the conditions that were changing as we were growing up. And then when COVID came along those industries took a big dump, so it's been hard. We've been on unemployment but that's run out, so we scrape by on my medical retirement from the military.

WSWS: Are you in touch with others in those industries?

S: Anybody who has worked in those industries, especially food service, tends to keep in touch. I've seen two major reactions among food service workers. Some left and looked for remote work. Those still in food service are pulling their hair out. There are not enough servers. Restaurant owners and managers will make posts "Pardon our slow service, No one wants to work here." People are not waiting tables because it's deadly. It's not because unemployment benefits are so great. People have to have their masks down to eat and drink. It's not the unemployment payment, it's not because they're lazy. There is a lot of anger among those who live off tips. It's a structure of compensation that is highly exploitative.

WSWS: They need a rank-and-file committee.

S: They do, they would benefit tremendously from a rank-and-file committee. There are already numerous online places where they commiserate about the life of food service workers. They need a committee.

WSWS: You followed our coverage of Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) if I remember correctly?

S: I have. I followed your coverage because no one else wanted to cover it. I thought the VWRFC was tremendous because it was a counterpoint to the United Auto Workers union. Many people [saw], and I didn't realize this until I watched the Volvo strike play out, but the VWRFC would make demands and mobilize people to stick to their guns. The UAW would act like they had no interest in fighting for what workers wanted. It was strange because the VWRFC would articulate what workers actually wanted and the UAW would just release pre-printed statements ignoring this. There was a tremendous disconnect between the democracy of the rank-and-file committee and the elitism of the UAW.

WSWS: In fact, they forced the workers to vote a second time on a contract they had already rejected by 60 percent.

S: I saw workers on UAW Local 2069's Facebook bringing that up. I don't understand how they aren't all pulling their hair out when they were forced to revote on a contract that they rejected. How is that democratic? Would you accept that in your gubernatorial election? Of course not! The union cannot be counted on for anything democratic at all.



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