

## War in Afghanistan: The Unseen Sacrifice

*James Wright*

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Near the end of Steven Spielberg's film *Lincoln* the president rides slowly across the battlefield at Petersburg. The cannons are stilled and the landscape is filled with the swollen and grotesque and tragic faces of the dead. This reminds Mr. Lincoln of the tragedy of war -- and contrasts sharply with the politics in Washington, just a few miles away.

This is a reminder that we all need to remember the costs in our current war in Afghanistan. I do not mean the financial cost -- although these are considerable. More importantly, we need to confront those costs that have been even more hidden than the future bills for these deficit-financed wars. Wars mean service and sacrifice and the costs of young lives. Our recent wars have been more than a few miles away -- and as a result much easier to ignore.

So far this year 302 American servicemen and women have died in Afghanistan, 2,166 since the war began over 11 years ago. There have been 17,674 wounded. Plus countless others bearing silent wounds. Each of them freely volunteered and went to war on our behalf. They served and sacrificed out of a sense of patriotic duty. Now their families and friends and comrades grieve as they try to impose some sense on it all.

For the rest of us, the war is abstract and distant. Fewer journalists and photographers cover its details any longer and even fewer politicians publicly discuss its reality. Anonymous sacrifice in unseen wars is not healthy for a democracy.

Deaths and wars go together. And with a military that represents less than 1 percent of the population, few Americans need personally to confront the human cost. But some surely do. As one family who lost a son in Afghanistan in the spring of 2011 wrote to the parents of a soldier killed last month, "Our family knows the pain and heartache your family is going through." Most of us have no idea.

In November of 2012, 16 American servicemen died in Afghanistan. They came from Booneville, Arkansas; Gardiner, Oregon; Gillette, New Jersey; Arcata, California; Shenandoah, Iowa; Rocky Mount, North Carolina; Running Springs, California; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Spokane, Washington; Greer, South Carolina; Island Heights, New Jersey; Glendora, California; and Jordan, Minnesota. Three were from upstate New York, reservists from the 178th Engineer Battalion whose homes were in Alden, Campbell, and Port Henry. These soldiers died on November 3 as a result of an IED.

Largely from small towns, these Americans died in distant places that few of us know: Helmand, Paktia, Kandahar, Ghazni, Faryab, and Uruzgan provinces. Their ages ranged from 19 to 32. Several of them had children and at least one left a pregnant wife. Their hometown and base newspapers and local television stations often had pictures of them smiling with their families. Most had served multiple tours in Afghanistan and/or Iraq.

If their nation was essentially unaware of these final sacrifices, their communities turned out to welcome them home for a final time. In a Minnesota town there were 1,300 American flags along the seven miles of the funeral procession. A friend who had been best man for this Marine's wedding said, "He's my best friend and he was supposed to come back." Sharing feelings that were repeated in several obituaries, the teacher of a dead soldier remembered that he was "quiet" and "sincere." He just wanted to serve and "to do what was right."

In Greer, South Carolina the Army Honor Guard folded and presented the flag on the coffin to the dead soldier's grandmother, the woman who had raised him. A reporter observed, "She caressed the flag throughout the ceremony, holding it securely in her arms."

The mother of another dead soldier said that her son was due to come home in 73 days, but now, "Everything I pick up, everybody's eyes I look into, I see him. He is just everything, he is my heart." The grandmother of another young man said "I miss him so much; it just breaks my heart that Junior will never come back..." His young daughter would never know him.

Nor will the nation he served. It continues. Five Americans have been killed in the first ten days of December: a Navy Seal rescuing a doctor being held hostage, a soldier who left two children, a Marine who sent a Facebook message to his mother saying, "All is well...I'll call you in the morning," a few hours before he was shot, as well as two National Guardsmen with the 164th Engineer Battalion. One was a 20-year-old North Dakotan and the other was a 41-year-old Montanan. They belonged to a North Dakota Guard unit. The Montanan's two daughters sang at his funeral service and his wife asked everyone to hug their family and friends tightly. The young North Dakotan was a musician and a boxer and loved sushi.

It is critical to know the human face of war. This means focusing our attention on the war our citizens are now fighting, to know what we want them to accomplish if we deploy them for two more years -- or longer. Maybe we can even modestly share the sacrifice by actually paying the financial cost of our wars -- including the long-term cost of caring for those who serve and sacrifice. These have been the first sustained wars in our history without a designated tax to pay for the war.

But finally this is about more than finances. Americans need to confront, as Mr. Lincoln did, the necessary human cost of war. In the summer of 1864 President Lincoln watched wagons with dead and wounded returning from what would become the long, bloody siege of Petersburg, and he said, "I cannot bear it. This suffering, this loss of life is dreadful." It still is.

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