



**DEATHS AND WOUNDS OF WAR:
SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS AT HOME**

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Speaking in the context of an earlier war being waged against fascism which aspired to engulf and subdue the world, Paul Robeson noted that “The battlefield is everywhere; there is no sheltered rear”. Here he was informing fellow artists, intellectuals and others who placed themselves outside, above and beyond the struggle for freedom and justice in the world, they could not and should not escape their moral responsibility to contribute to this vital struggle. But we can also see in this insightful assertion an additional message and meaning for our time. Indeed, “sheltered rears” do become battlefronts themselves, for the consequences of the wars we wage elsewhere are eventually and inevitably brought home to us in various, serious and unsettling ways.

Thus, the recent horrifying tragedy at Fort Hood, if we read it rightfully, brings home to us the visible and invisible wounds of war, the tragic killing and deaths of innocents at home and abroad, and signs and symptoms of a host of related issues we need urgently to address. Clearly, we must always begin by expressing a special concern and sadness at the injuring and taking of life of innocents, and offering prayerful hope that the bereaved families and friends will be blessed with consolation, courage and peace; that the injured will soon heal and the war and its casualty-riddled consequences will come to a quick and decisive end.

Here it would be easy to misdirect our attention and start rummaging thru the worn-out rags and rubble of religious and racial stereotypes to explain Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan’s becoming unhinged and apparently killing 13 and wounding 30 of his fellow soldiers. But it would be better to leave religion, race or ethnic group identity and indictment aside, and ask what in Maj. Hasan’s troubled mind and life would motivate him to do this and then ask are there other soldiers in a similar situation, sending S.O.S. postcards from the edge? For a

rightful reading of recent and earlier history would reveal similar patterns and consequences crying out for corrective and preventive measures.

Given the alleged shooter’s name, the Muslim groups around the country felt compelled to denounce the act and distance themselves from Maj. Hasan for fear of a repeat of anti-Muslim hysteria and hate-fests. But the “need” for Muslims collectively to justify themselves for the act of a person or group exposes again the premature declarations and illusions of a post-racial society and the equal consideration of peoples. After all, Whites, whether Christians or Jews, don’t feel a need to explain away the racial and religious implications of White people’s crimes, even horrendous ones. Indeed, no White group or the media felt it necessary to denounce, in a needed defense of Whiteness and Christianity, Timothy McVeigh’s murderous bombing in Oklahoma City which killed 168 persons and wounded 700.

But already the media and its hired and volunteer help have wondered out loud about the meaning of Maj. Hasan’s religion and ethnicity for his alleged act. Although he is an Arab American born in the U.S., they have also raised questions around his parents’ ethnicity and immigrant status and held background conversations with his cousin in Palestine. But again, there was no question of race, religion or ethnic group, and parents’ origins or immigrant status concerning John Russell who killed five fellow soldiers at Camp Liberty in Iraq in May. Instead, “they” said he was suffering from extreme stress and the discussion of the incident was quietly and quickly put to rest.

We do not know what pushed Maj. Hasan, a psychiatrist, himself, over the edge, but suggestions reflect a complexity of possibilities: “secondary trauma”, i.e., vicariously experiencing the primary trauma of his patients’ suffering

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and narratives of the gruesome acts of war; “compassionate fatigue” thru over-identifying with his patients and suffering psychological exhaustion; apprehension of being sent to the war zone unwillingly; and constant racial and religious harassment. Also, many thoughtful analysts have rightly placed his problem in the context of a larger and much-needed discussion about the savagely severe and sustained stress on soldiers in these unjust, immoral and unwinnable wars the U.S. is currently waging. It is this context of high-level stress and hellish horror that leads to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D.), depression and other mental problems, and homicide, suicide and a full range of self-destructive behavior by soldiers in the war zone and at home.

And in these current wars, the regular ravages of war on the body and mind are augmented by the shameful way the country’s leaders have treated this current volunteer force: inefficient treatment on the battlefield, multiple and relentless deployments and returning soldiers’ suffering visible and invisible wounds, denied prompt and adequate care and counseling, and left to fend and find solutions for themselves. In addition, families ill-prepared to provide the professional care and support services the returning soldiers need, find themselves watching helplessly as their loved ones and relatives progressively deteriorate and descend into drug abuse, bouts of anger and rage, domestic violence, depression and homelessness.

Moreover, often, soldiers won’t seek help because of fear of being called cowards, weak or suspiciously sick. After all, to live in the U.S. is to be included in a conversation and narrative dedicated to a self-congratulatory, constantly-right, triumphant and world-trumping conception of itself. Such conceptions won’t allow U.S. soldiers to be sick or its warriors to be psychologically wounded or “weak”. So they are given psychotropic pills to power up and down; quick counsel to “suck it up”, punishment for resistance and requests for discharge, and promises of dismissal of charges, if they return to the killing fields.

We do not talk much of peace as a principle and practice of life. The leaders of the country have constructed an ongoing conversation of power instead of peace, dominance instead of dialog, and reliance on weapons rather than the cultivation of good will and shared interests in the world. Writing of her experience and thoughts, having served as a consultant in the U.S. delegation to the founding conference of the UN, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune affirmed the UN Charter’s fundamental principles of human rights, freedom, justice and peace. But she noted, “to put life and meaning into these words, this is the job for all of us”. Indeed, she said, given the global nature of the problems we face, “we must remake the world”. And if we do this, putting in place and practice the principles of peace, justice, security and well-being for all, we will not only solve the soldiers’ problems, but our own and the world’s as well.

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