More US Soldiers Die in Vain

Exclusive: Adding to the painful death toll in America’s seemingly endless war in Afghanistan, 30 U.S. soldiers were killed on Saturday when their helicopter was shot down. The deaths provoked predictable comments about how they didn’t die in vain, but ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern says the hard truth is that they did.

By Ray McGovern

Many of those preaching at American church services on Sunday likely extolled as “heroes” the 30 American and eight Afghan troops killed Saturday west of Kabul, when a helicopter on a night mission crashed, apparently after taking fire from Taliban forces.

In churches across the country, the U.S. troops were surely praised for protecting “our way of life,” and few would demur given the painful circumstances.

But, sadly, such accolades are at least misguided if not dishonest. Most preachers do not have a clue as to what U.S. forces are doing in Afghanistan or why.

Yet, should we fault these American preachers who reach for words designed to give comfort to their fellow citizens who are mourning the deaths of so many young servicemen?

As hard as it might seem, yes, we should. It is high time these preachers be held to account, since the patriotic pap they dish out serves merely to perpetuate unnecessary killing.

Many preachers are intelligent enough to see through the propaganda for perpetual war; but most will not take the risk of offending their flocks with unpalatable truth.

Better not to risk protests from pew patriots, and to avoid, at all costs, offending the loved ones of those who have been killed and, understandably, want to give some meaning to the young, snuffed-out lives.

Best to Just Praise and Pray

Far better to pray for those already killed now and those who in the future will “give the last full measure of devotion to our country.”

By and large, American preachers are afraid to tell the truth. They lack the
virtue that Thomas Aquinas taught is the foundation of all virtue, courage. He wrote (to use the vernacular) that all other virtue is specious if you have no guts.

Writer James Hollingsworth hit the nail on the head: “Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear.” Like the truth.

Those who ache the most in the face of unnecessary death are mothers. And many mothers do summon the courage to say, and say loudly, ENOUGH.

Yes, my son died for no good purpose, these mothers painfully acknowledge. He did die in vain. Now, we all must deal with it. Stop the false patriotism. And most importantly, stop the killing.

Cindy Sheehan is one such mother. She and others have tried to put a dent into the specious logic that attempts to translate unnecessary death into justification for still more unnecessary death.

But they get little air or ink in the Fawning Corporate Media. Rather, what you can expect to hear today in the FCM is fulsome rhetoric about how these troops “cannot have died in vain;” how their deaths must redouble our resolve to “honor their sacrifice.”

Gen. John R. Allen, the top U.S. general in Afghanistan, has already primed the pump, saying on Saturday: “All of those killed in this operation were true heroes who had already given so much in the defense of freedom.”

And Joint Chiefs Chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen, said, “the best way we can honor that sacrifice is to keep at it, keep fighting, keep moving forward. I’m certain that is what our fallen would have wanted, and it is certainly what we are going to do.”

All this was duly reported in Sunday’s Washington Post and other leading U.S. newspapers, without context or comment.

Throughout the day, TV viewers got a steady diet of this kind of specious logic from talk show hosts feeding on the grist from Mullen, Allen and others. After all, many pundits work for news organizations owned or allied with some of the same corporations profiteering from war.

Too bad CBS’s legendary Edward R. Murrow is long since dead; and the widely respected Walter Cronkite, as well.

Taking the CBS baton from Murrow who had challenged the “red scare” witch hunts of Sen. Joe McCarthy, Cronkite gradually saw through the dishonesty responsible
for the killing of so many in Vietnam and finally spoke up.

**Corporal Shank & Specialist Kirkland**

Five years ago, as I was lecturing in Missouri, the body of 18-year-old Cpl. Jeremy Shank of Jackson, Missouri, (population 12,000) came home for burial. He was killed in Hawijah, Iraq, on Sept. 6, 2006, while on a “dismounted security patrol when he encountered enemy forces using small arms,” according to the Pentagon.

Which enemy forces? Two weeks before Shank was killed, Stephen Hadley, then President George W. Bush’s national security adviser, acknowledged that the challenge in Iraq “isn’t about insurgency, isn’t about terror; it’s about sectarian violence.”

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Makiki added, “The most important element in the security plan is to curb the religious violence.”

So was Shank’s mission to prevent Iraqi religious fanatics from killing one another? What do you think; was that worth his life?

On Sept. 7, 2006, the day after Shank was killed, President Bush, in effect, mocked his death by drawing the familiar but bogus connection to 9/11, claiming, “Five years after Sept. 11, 2001, America is safer, and American is winning the war on terror.”

Back at the First Baptist Church in Jackson, Missouri, Rev. Carter Frey eulogized Shank as one of those who “put themselves in harm’s way and paid the ultimate sacrifice so you and I can have freedom to live in this country.”

Correction: It was not Cpl. Shank who put himself in harm's way; it was those who used a peck of lies to launch a bloody, unnecessary war, first and foremost, Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, not to mention the craven Congress that authorized it and much of the U.S. news media that went cheerily along.

Was separating Shia from Sunni a mission worth what is so facilely called the “ultimate sacrifice,” or, for other troops, the penultimate one paid by tens of thousands of veterans trying to adjust to life with brain injury and/or lacking limbs?

Despite the self-serving rhetoric about “heroes,” the young, small-town Shanks of America stand low in the priorities of Establishment Washington. They are pawns in the war games played by generals and politicians far, far from the battlefield.

In the Army in which I served, the troops were often referred to simply as “warm
bodies;” that is, at least before they became cold and stiff. But that term was normally not accompanied by the mechanistic disdain reflected in the memo by a Fort Lewis-McCord Army major that came to light last year.

On March 20, 2010, Specialist Derrick Kirkland, back from his second tour in Iraq, hanged himself in the barracks at Fort Lewis-McCord, leaving behind a wife and young daughter. Kirkland had been suffering from severe depression and anxiety attacks, for which he had been ridiculed by his comrades.

**Expendable**

As for his superiors, it was Army policy to do everything possible to avoid diagnosing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And so, Kirkland became a new entry in a little-known statistic; namely, the one that shows more active-duty soldiers are committing suicide than are killed in combat.

Not a problem for Maj. Keith Markham, Executive Officer of Kirkland’s unit, who put the prevailing attitude all too clearly in a private memo sent to his platoon leaders. “We have an unlimited supply of expendable labor,” wrote Markham.

And, sadly, he is right. Because of the poverty draft (aka the “professional Army”), more than half of which comes from small towns like Jackson, Missouri, and from inner cities, where good jobs and educational opportunity are rare to nonexistent.

I suspect that one factor behind the very high suicide rate is a belated realization among the troops that they have been conned, lied to, that they have been used as pawns in an unconscionably cynical game.

I would imagine that corporals and specialists, as well as high brass like the legendary two-time Congressional Medal of Honor winner, Marine Gen. Smedley Butler, often come to this realization belatedly, and that this probably exacerbates the pain.

Butler wrote *War is a Racket* in 1935, describing the workings of the military-industrial complex well before President Dwight Eisenhower gave it a name.

It is not difficult for troops to learn that the phenomenon about which Eisenhower warned has now broadened into an even more pervasive and powerful military-industrial-corporate-congressional-media-institutional-church complex. Small wonder the suicide rate is so high.

And for what? Please raise your hand if you now believe, or have ever believed, that the White House and Pentagon have sent a hundred thousand troops to
Afghanistan for the reason given by President Barack Obama; namely, “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat” the 50 to 100 al-Qaeda who U.S. intelligence agencies say are still in Afghanistan?

And keep your hands up, those of you who are about to throw something at the TV screen the next time Gen. David Petraeus intones the squishy phrase “fragile and reversible” to describe what he keeps calling “progress” in Afghanistan.

Troops returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan know better. It must be particularly hard for them to hear the lies about “progress,” and then be ridiculed and marginalized for having PTSD.

The Establishment Church

I added “institutional church” into the military-industrial-corporate-congressional-media-institutional-church complex coined above because, with very few exceptions, the institutional church is still riding shotgun for the system, and the wars.

Thus, instead of an indictment of “wars of choice” (formerly known as wars of aggression) in which many people die, including thousands of civilians, most men and women of the cloth are likely to fall back on platitudinous, fulsome praise for those who “have given their lives so that we can live in freedom.”

And there will be very few outspoken folk like Cindy Sheehan, painfully aware that courage and truth are far more important than fear, even when that fear includes the painful recognition that the life of a beloved son was wasted.

There may be just a few who will dare point out that the mission given our troops has made us less, not more, safe at home, and even ask what is so hard to understand about the commandment Thou Shalt Not Kill or the peaceful message from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount?

In commenting on Saturday’s killing of the 38 troops in the helicopter crash, preachers could consider using something less “quaint,” less “obsolete”, something more realistic and truer than the customary encomia for those who have made “the ultimate sacrifice.”

It might be more appropriate to turn to Rudyard Kipling for words more to the point, if politically and congregationally incorrect: “If they ask you why we died, tell them because our fathers lied.”

Or: “When you’re wounded and left on Afghanistan’s plains, and the women come out to cut up what remains, jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains and go to your gawd like a soldier.”
Ray McGovern served as an infantry/intelligence officer and then as a CIA analyst for almost 30 years. He now works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington, and serves on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).