

Recalling a Young American's Sacrifice

Nine years ago, as President George W. Bush and the neocons prepared to invade Iraq, Rachel Corrie, a 23-year-old American woman concerned about the region's deepening violence, was in Gaza watching Palestinian homes being destroyed and put her body in the way, her parents Cindy and Craig Corrie recall on the anniversary.

By Cindy and Craig Corrie

It has been nine years since our daughter Rachel was crushed to death under an Israeli-driven, U.S.-funded-and-built Caterpillar D9 bulldozer in Gaza.

In March 2003, the news was full of talk of war with Iraq – a preemptive war to protect the West, particularly the U.S. and Israel, from the weapons of mass destruction then alleged to have been amassed by Saddam Hussein.

When Rachel traveled to Gaza that year, the world was not watching. According to Human Rights Watch, from September 2000 until September 2004, 1,600 Palestinian homes in the city of Rafah were destroyed by the Israeli military as it occupied the Gaza Strip. One-tenth of the population lost their homes.

Rachel chose to be in Gaza when the ground attack against Iraq broke out. She feared an escalation of the violence and a tightening of the isolation against people there, as the world looked to the northeast and watched for the expected carnage in Iraq.

In 2003, Rachel wrote: "I went to a rally a few days ago in Khan Younis in solidarity with the people of Iraq. Many analogies were made about the continuing suffering of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation and the upcoming occupation of Iraq by the United States – not the war itself – but the certain aftermath of the war.

"If people aren't already thinking about the consequences of this war for the people of the entire region then I hope they will start."

Now, in 2012, we listen to similar news – calls for bombing Iran to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons. The preemptive war has already begun with the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists.

Our government tells us sanctions against Iran will pressure their government to abandon any program to develop these weapons, but experience tells us sanctions only increase the defensiveness of repressive regimes and tighten their control over their populations.

The news from our politicians is discouraging and even frightening, but in the meeting places and streets in our communities, we are making the kind of change that Rachel envisioned.

It is happening in Olympia, Washington, with continuing support for the Olympia Food Co-op's boycott of Israeli products until the rights of Palestinians are addressed.

Throughout Puget Sound this week, we have successfully challenged efforts by the Israeli government to use members of the Israeli gay community to distract from the continuing oppression of Palestinian people.

Churches in our region are conversing about divestment from corporations like Caterpillar Inc. for their refusal to address their continuing participation in human rights abuses and the illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

In 2002, Rachel wrote, "I think it's important for people who oppose war and repression to speak about who we are as a community in addition to speaking about war and racism and injustice. We are not outside. I think it's important that human rights and resistance to oppression be included in the way we define ourselves as a community."

As the threat of war with Iran, the disintegration of the situation in Afghanistan, and the bombing of Gaza continue, the work we are all doing in our hometowns at the grassroots level is powerful and critical. Today, as we remember Rachel's stand nine years ago, we encourage our friends across the country and world to strengthen your own communities, educate, educate, educate, support each other in taking action, and walk with peace, love, and forgiveness in your hearts as you work for change.

'War on Women' Breaches Global Norms

Republican bills taking aim at women's reproductive freedoms have raised alarms about a "war on women," a development that is shaking up the American political scene. But some of the legislation also is putting the U.S. outside the bounds of international norms, as Nat Parry reports.

By Nat Parry

A barrage of recent legislative initiatives spearheaded by Republicans on the national and state levels collectively dubbed the "war on women" by Democrats

and women's advocacy groups threaten to roll back U.S. commitments on the international level on gender equality and human rights.

With Campaign 2012 in full swing, the controversies of this war on women have found their way to the top of the national discussion, with other domestic problems such as the economy seemingly taking a back seat this election year.

The battles have been fueled by outrageous statements by prominent Republicans such as Rush Limbaugh calling a defender of birth control access a "slut" and "prostitute," as well as some rather absurd legislation being adopted, such as the recently signed Virginia law requiring women to submit to a medically unnecessary ultrasound before getting an abortion.

At a demonstration at the Virginia State Capitol protesting the ultrasound law earlier this month, 31 women's rights advocates were arrested, prompting a rebuke of the police by State Delegate Delores L. McQuinn, D-Richmond, who called the arrests "just the latest example of government overreach that we've seen in recent weeks."

"The men and women who marched on Capitol Square have a right to peacefully protest without the threat that they will be arrested for exercising that right," McQuinn said in a news release. "At several recent women's rights events, there has been an overabundance of police presence."

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney has waded into the fight with provocative statements about ending the Planned Parenthood program, which provides preventive health care for about five million women a year. According to Planned Parenthood, 76 percent of their clients have incomes at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level.

The program has received federal funding since 1970, when President Richard Nixon signed into law the Family Planning Services and Population Research Act, which increased funding for family planning and maternal health care. In signing the law, Nixon said that "no American woman should be denied access to family planning assistance because of her economic condition."

At the time, the legislation enjoyed bipartisan support from liberals, who saw contraception access as increasing families' control over their lives, and conservatives, who saw it as a way to keep people off welfare.

Now, however, national Republican leaders such as Mitt Romney flippantly declare that they would end the program. "Planned Parenthood, we're going to get rid of that," Romney said in an interview on Tuesday.

But eliminating maternal health care for low-income women would push the United

States further from the developed world's standards for maternal health, and may even constitute a breach of international law.

The relevant legal framework providing for the rights of women include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees political equality between men and women, as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

While the U.S. is a full state party to the ICCPR, it is only a signatory to the CEDAW and the ICESCR, one of only a few countries around the world that have failed to ratify these treaties.

As article 12 of the CEDAW reads:

"1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care services, including those related to family planning.

"2. Notwithstanding the provisions of paragraph I of this article, States Parties shall ensure to women appropriate services in connection with pregnancy, confinement and the post-natal period, granting free services where necessary, as well as adequate nutrition during pregnancy and lactation."

Besides contravening international norms, eliminating programs such as Planned Parenthood would also likely have a disastrous impact on women's health in the United States, which already ranks near the bottom of the developed world in terms of maternal mortality.

According to recent UN data, maternal health in the U.S. has declined significantly over recent years, with maternal mortality rates increasing from 6.6 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1987 to 13.3 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2006.

From 2009 to 2010, the U.S. ranking on maternal mortality fell from 41st to 50th in the world. Women in the United States face a higher risk of maternal death than nearly all European countries, as well as Canada and several countries in Asia and the Middle East.

A recent Amnesty International report documents the challenges that women in the U.S. face in obtaining the services they need, and exposes multiple failures in the health care system, including: language barriers to care; lack of information about maternal care and family planning options; lack of active participation in care protocols; inadequate postpartum care; and a lack of

accountability and oversight.

If Republicans have their way in eliminating existing programs for maternal health such as Planned Parenthood, all of these problems documented by Amnesty International will likely be exacerbated.

The war on women, however, is not limited to assaults on maternal health. While much of the debate has focused on GOP efforts to impede women's access to prenatal care and abortions, the controversies also include largely partisan disputes over protection against gender-based violence.

The Violence Against Women Act, which was adopted overwhelmingly in 1994 and renewed easily in 2000 and 2005, has suddenly become a partisan issue this year. On Feb. 2, the Senate Judiciary Committee approved legislation reauthorizing VAWA on a party-line vote of 10-8. The legislation received no GOP support among committee members, which was, according to Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, the first time VAWA legislation did not receive bipartisan support out of committee.

Republicans objected to language in the bill that would extend protections against violence to undocumented immigrants and LGBT victims of domestic violence, as well as allowing Native American authorities to prosecute some non-native offenders.

These extended safeguards, however, are widely seen as vital to protect some of the most vulnerable members of society, who tend to lack even the most basic legal protections and access to justice, and could help bring the U.S. into compliance with UN recommendations.

As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women documented in a report last year, U.S. policies concerning domestic violence, sexual assault in the military and treatment of women in detention fall far short of adequately protecting victims.

The report pointed to "a lack of legally binding federal provisions providing substantive protection against or prevention of acts of violence against women. This lack of substantive protective legislation, combined with inadequate implementation of some laws, policies and programmes, has resulted in the continued prevalence of violence against women and the discriminatory treatment of victims, with a particularly detrimental impact on poor, minority and immigrant women."

To remedy this situation, the UN official offered several recommendations, including:

“(a) Explore more uniform remedies for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. Expanding federal causes of action under VAWA, where possible, would mitigate current discrimination, and increase uniformity and accountability at the state and local levels.

“(b) Review and more effectively address the disproportionate impact that violence has on poor, minority, and immigrant women.

“(c) Re-evaluate existing mechanisms at federal, state, local and tribal levels for protecting victims and punishing offenders, given that calls for help often do not result in either arrests or successful prosecutions.

“(d) Establish meaningful standards for enforcement of protection orders and impose consequences for a failure to enforce.

“(e) Initiate local and national dialogues with relevant stakeholders to consider the effectiveness, in theory and application, of expedited proceedings, mandatory arrest policies, mandatory prosecution policies, and batterer’s programs.”

The Special Rapporteur also recommended strengthening legal safeguards to prevent discrimination against victims in housing and employment, pervasive sexual harassment and assault of women in the military, violence against women in prison and the lack of enforcement of orders of protection.

Although the proposed changes to VAWA would go a long way in addressing some of these outstanding concerns, the bill faces the threat of a Republican filibuster in the Senate which could kill the legislation.

As Huffington Post reports, “the bill has five Republican co-sponsors, but would need at least seven GOP votes to get to the 60 needed to break a filibuster and pass the Senate.”

While such a level of support seems achievable in the upper chamber, final passage would still be a difficult challenge for the Democrats, considering the House of Representatives is controlled by Republicans, who have made clear their agenda of waging war on women, and rolling back international standards on women’s rights.

So far, the Republican-controlled House has taken no action on companion legislation to the Senate’s version of VAWA.

Nat Parry is the co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*. [This story appeared previously at <http://compliancecampaign.wordpress.com/>]

Banks Are Called on to Repent

America's banks remain under fire, including a public resignation by a Goldman Sachs executive disgusted by the firm's abuse of its clients. New protests also include calls by some Christian churches for the banks to repent for their roles in the nation's foreclosure crisis, Michael Winship reports.

By Michael Winship

Growing up Protestant in a small town in upstate New York, the commemoration of Lent was not as major an event as it would be in, say, a Catholic household. We didn't give up chocolate or gum or anything else for those 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter, nor did most of the grown-ups we knew forsake any of their particular pleasures or bad habits.

When I was 12, one night a week during Lent was spent in religious training before becoming a member of our church at a service on Maundy Thursday (what Catholics and many others call Holy Thursday, the day of The Last Supper).

But baptism was a prerequisite for membership and I had not yet been christened in the Congregational Church we attended; neither had my parents or my younger brother and sister. So all five heathens were lined up in the living room one Monday evening, and our minister quickly did the deed with a bowl of tap water. Then we had cake.

My other powerful memory of the Lenten season is weekly religious breakfasts on cold Wednesday mornings. I was in high school and it meant waking up even earlier than usual on frigid winter days and getting a ride to the parsonage.

Yawning protests to the contrary, those meals were worth it. In that big, white-framed house, we were greeted with the sweet maternal warmth of the minister's wife, enormous platters of food, and a brief talk by the minister on the Eastertime meaning of it all, preaching repentance and redemption but suffused more with brightness than brimstone.

Afterward, each of us walked the few remaining blocks to school, our breath in frosty flumes, full of bacon, scrambled eggs and a certain pious self-satisfaction. No fasting for us.

All of which came to mind while learning that today, some churches are taking matters into their own hands and delivering one of the most powerful Lenten

messages ever. According to the progressive website *ThinkProgress*, “As congregations across the country observe the period between Ash Wednesday and Easter by sacrificing and repenting, religious leaders are asking big banks that have wrongfully foreclosed on homeowners and exacerbated the pain of the housing crisis to do the same.”

On Ash Wednesday, churches in San Francisco announced they were removing \$10 million from Wells Fargo and called on the bank, as per the advocacy group Faith in Public Life, “to put an immediate freeze on its foreclosures and repent for their misconduct.”

The March 9 *New York Times* reported that, “The Rev. Richard Smith of St. John the Evangelist, an Episcopal church in San Francisco, likened the divestment campaign and public protests to early Christianity’s ritual of ‘reconciliation of the penitents.’ Far from taking place in the private sanctity of the confessional, that rite occurred in public, with the penitent overseen by a priest and required to present himself before a bishop.

“‘It seemed like a parallel to us,’ said Mr. Smith, 62. ‘Our banks have done a great deal of damage in a very public way. So it seems appropriate as we enter into a season of penitence that we invite those who separated themselves from the community to repent with us. It’s basically ‘Ethics 101.’”

The effort is part of several national campaigns to get consumers and community groups to remove their money from the big banks and transfer accounts to credit unions and smaller financial institutions.

Travis Waldron at *ThinkProgress* wrote, “Religious organizations have been at the forefront of movements to get consumers to move their money. The New Bottom Line, a coalition of faith groups, pledged to move \$1 billion this year, and before Thanksgiving, churches moved \$55 million away from Wall Street banks with pledges to remove as much as \$100 million more.”

Occupy Wall Street has been in the lead, as has the Move Your Money project its website even includes a handy locator that lists credit unions and community banks near your zip code (<http://ow.ly/9ELQ6>)

On Nov. 5, “Bank Transfer Day,” some 40,000 moved their money out of the nation’s biggest banks, but according to the consulting firm Javelin Strategy and Research, the event actually had a much wider impact.

In a Jan. 26 report, Javelin estimated, “5.6 million U.S. adults with a banking relationship changed providers in the past 90 days. Of those switchers, 610,000 US adults (or 11% of the 5.6 million) cited Bank Transfer Day as their reason and actually moved their accounts from a large to a small institution.”

The March 2 *Los Angeles Times* noted, "Consumers fed up with the rising tide of bank fees helped the nation's credit unions more than double their number of new customers last year. More than 1.3 million Americans opened new credit union accounts last year, up from less than 600,000 in 2010, the National Credit Union Administration reported. That brings the number of credit union members to a record 91.8 million."

As a result of all this, *CNN Money* reported last November, "The nation's 10 biggest banks could stand to lose as much as \$185 billion in deposits in the next year due to customer defections, according to cg42, a Wilton, Conn.-based management consulting firm that has conducted research for several of the nation's top banks."

Sounds like a lot, but keep in mind those same ten banks hold retail deposits of \$2.04 trillion.

Nonetheless, public opinion and the post-meltdown, Dodd-Frank financial regulations have the banks and other financial institutions scrambling, while they continue to scream in protest and lobby on Capitol Hill against the ignominy of reform.

On March 12, that \$25 billion foreclosure abuse settlement was filed by the federal government and 49 states Oklahoma was the holdout with Ally Financial, Bank of America, Citigroup, J.P. Morgan Chase and Wells Fargo. Twenty billion of it will be used to give a break to military and the unemployed, reduce principal for delinquent or near default loans and refinance mortgages already underwater.

Another billion and half will provide some small restitution to people whose homes were sold or foreclosed upon. But as the Associated Press pointed out, "About 11 million American households are 'underwater' on their mortgages, meaning they owe more than their homes are worth," but the settlement "is expected to reduce loans for only about 1 million."

We're told that the banks, desperate when thrown a lifeline by taxpayers in 2008, are now stronger and better able to weather a crisis than they were. Fifteen of the 19 largest financial firms passed the Federal Reserve's latest stress test.

Regardless of whether we as individuals could survive, the test asks, according to *The New York Times*, "whether banks would have enough capital to weather a peak unemployment rate of 13 percent, a 21 percent drop in housing prices and severe market shocks, as well as economic slowdowns in Europe and Asia.

"The Fed's stress tests assumed that the 19 banks would be slammed with \$534 billion of losses in just over two years. Even after such hits, most banks would

emerge with adequate capital.”

But one of those that failed was Citigroup, our third largest, the one that took the most government assistance during the meltdown and this in the wake of last week’s announcement that in 2011 the bank paid CEO Vikram Pandit nearly \$15 million in total compensation, including a cash bonus of more than \$5 million, his first since the 2008 crash.

What’s more, the *Times* said the tests revealed to the Fed that, “In business loans – called commercial and industrial loans by bankers – Citi and U.S. Bancorp had the worst portfolios, while Wells Fargo and Fifth Third had the shakiest credit card portfolios. In commercial real estate, regional banks appear to be the most vulnerable.” Swell.

There’s still a lot to be angry about, still good reason to contemplate transferring your money or at least filing with the new Consumer Financial Protection Bureau if you have a complaint about your mortgage, deposit accounts or credit cards (consumerfinance.gov).

As former Goldman Sachs executive director Greg Smith said in this week’s bombshell *Times* op-ed announcing his resignation, “It astounds me how little senior management gets a basic truth: If clients don’t trust you they will eventually stop doing business with you. It doesn’t matter how smart you are.”

Jeff Horwitz at the financial daily *American Banker* this week exposed J.P. Morgan Chase’s credit card services division, reporting that it “took procedural shortcuts and used faulty account records in suing tens of thousands of delinquent credit card borrowers for at least two years,” sparking an investigation by the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency.

“The bank’s errors could call into question the legitimacy of billions of dollars in outstanding claims against debtors and of legal judgments Chase has already won, current and former Chase employees say.”

As *Rolling Stone*’s Matt Taibbi observed, “Countless credit card borrowers would now have collection agents chasing them for money they did not owe,” and in some cases, according to a key witness, Chase actually owed the customer money.

Allegedly one of Chase’s more pernicious practices was “robo-signing,” the mass production and signing of credit-related affidavits without any semblance of verification, an illegal shortcut similar to the one that plagued the mortgage market and one of the targets of a new report from the inspector general of the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

“Managers at major banks ignored widespread errors in the foreclosure process,”

the *Times* reports, “in some cases instructing employees to adopt make-believe titles and speed documents through the system despite internal objections the report concludes that managers were aware of the problems and did nothing to correct them. The shortcuts were directed by managers in some cases.”

In one of the more blatant falsifications, a Wells Fargo employee whose prior work experience was at a pizza parlor was named a bank vice president.

Inspector General David Montoya said, “I believe the reports we just released will leave the reader asking one question – how could so many people have participated in this misconduct? The answer – simple greed.”

Simple greed hey banks, how about giving that up for Lent?

Michael Winship, senior writing fellow at Demos and president of the Writers Guild of America, East, is senior writer of the weekly public television series, “Moyers & Company.” Comment at www.BillMoyers.com.

Tragic Lessons of Afghan Massacre

The massacre of 16 Afghans, including nine children, allegedly by a deranged U.S. Army sergeant has stirred more anger toward the decade-long, U.S.-led occupation of Afghanistan, but it also underscores how the stresses of endless war are shattering the psyches of combat soldiers, as Democracy Now’s Amy Goodman notes.

By Amy Goodman

We may never know what drove a U.S. Army staff sergeant to head out into the Afghan night and allegedly murder at least 16 civilians in their homes, among them nine children and three women.

The massacre near Belambai, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, has shocked the world and intensified the calls for an end to the longest war in U.S. history. The attack has been called tragic, which it surely is. But when Afghans attack U.S. forces, they are called “terrorists.” That is, perhaps, the inconsistency at the core of U.S. policy, that democracy can be delivered through the barrel of a gun, that terrorism can be fought by terrorizing a nation.

“I did it,” the alleged mass murderer said as he returned to the forward operating base outside Kandahar, that southern city called the “heartland of the Taliban.” He is said to have left the base at 3 a.m. and walked to three nearby

homes, methodically killing those inside.

One farmer, Abdul Samad, was away at the time. His wife, four sons, and four daughters were killed. Some of the victims had been stabbed, some set on fire. Samad told The New York Times, "Our government told us to come back to the village, and then they let the Americans kill us."

The massacre follows massive protests against the U.S. military's burning of copies of the Quran, which followed the video showing U.S. Marines urinating on the corpses of Afghans. Two years earlier, the notorious "kill team" of U.S. soldiers that murdered Afghan civilians for sport, posing for gruesome photos with the corpses and cutting off fingers and other body parts as trophies, also was based near Kandahar.

In response, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta rolled out a string of cliches, reminding us that "war is hell." Panetta visited Camp Leatherneck in Helmand province, near Kandahar, this week on a previously scheduled trip that coincidentally fell days after the massacre.

The 200 Marines invited to hear him speak were forced to leave their weapons outside the tent. NBC News reported that such instructions were "highly unusual," as Marines are said to always have weapons on hand in a war zone. Earlier, upon his arrival, a stolen truck raced across the landing strip toward his plane, and the driver leapt out of the cab, on fire, in an apparent attack.

The violence doesn't just happen in the war zone. Back in the U.S., the wounds of war are manifesting in increasingly cruel ways.

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The 38-year-old staff sergeant who allegedly committed the massacre was from Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM), a sprawling military facility near Tacoma, Wash., that has been described by Stars and Stripes newspaper as "the most troubled base in the military" and, more recently, as "on the brink." 2011 marked a record for soldier suicides there. The base also was the home for the "kill team."

The Seattle Times reported earlier this month that 285 patients at JBLM's Madigan Army Medical Center had their post-traumatic stress disorder diagnoses inexplicably reversed by a forensic psychiatric screening team. The reversals are now under investigation due to concerns they were partly motivated by a desire to avoid paying those who qualify for medical benefits.

Kevin Baker was also a staff sergeant in the U.S. Army, stationed at Fort Lewis. After two deployments to Iraq, he refused a third after being denied a PTSD diagnosis. He began organizing to bring the troops home. He told me:

“If a soldier is wounded on a battlefield in combat, and they’re bleeding to death, and an officer orders that person to not receive medical attention, costing that service member their life, that officer would be found guilty of dereliction of duty and possibly murder.

“But when that happens in the U.S., when that happens for soldiers that are going to seek help, and officers are ordering not a clear diagnosis for PTSD and essentially denying them that metaphoric tourniquet, real psychological help, and the soldier ends up suffering internally to the point of taking their own life or somebody else’s life, then these officers and this military and the Pentagon has to be held responsible for these atrocities.”

While too late to save Abdul Samad’s family, Baker’s group, March Forward!, along with Iraq Veterans Against the War’s “Operation Recovery,” which seeks to ban the deployment of troops already suffering from PTSD, may well help end the disastrous, terrorizing occupation of Afghanistan.

Denis Moynihan contributed research to this column.

Amy Goodman is the host of “Democracy Now!,” a daily international TV/radio news hour airing on more than 1,000 stations in North America. She is the author of *Breaking the Sound Barrier*, recently released in paperback and now a New York Times best-seller.

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