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TOMGRAM

Kelly Denton-Borhaug, Planting a Million Seeds of Violence

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In her new piece, [*TomDispatch* regular](#) Kelly Denton-Borhaug discusses the eerie psychology of America's elected representatives as they continue, using ever more [staggering numbers](#) of taxpayer dollars, to [plant the seeds](#) of future violence around the planet. And what a time for it when, from [Ukraine](#) to [Asia](#), [Syria](#) to [Africa](#), this country continues to play tag with war in such a big-time way.

To use Denton-Borhaug's imagery, how we've sown those seeds in this century is a truly grim tale. I mean, just look at Afghanistan. Yes, 20 years after the rash invasion of that country in response to the acts of 19 mostly Saudi hijackers, we're officially done with our disastrous war there. (Okay, okay, the Biden administration and the U.S. military have continued to mutter about "[over-the-horizon](#)" air strikes there, so who knows.) But the "seeds" we planted over those two long decades of war-making have, by now, turned into nightmare forests — if you happen to be an Afghan, anyway. Our "nation-building" effort in their country quite literally left it as perhaps the most calamitous wreck on Planet Earth. Then, having finally dumped it on the trash heap of history, the Biden administration froze at least \$7 billion in Afghan funds so its central bank couldn't access them for use in that desperate, devastated land.

And just the other day, Joe Biden (undoubtedly fearing pressure from Republicans for being “soft” on the Taliban) **decided** that only \$3.5 billion of those funds should ever go to actual Afghans, while the rest should go to the survivors of those who died in the 9/11 attacks. No matter that a **million or more** innocent children may die of starvation in Afghanistan over this winter in a **land where** paychecks, bank accounts, and food have, for so many, become things of the past. As Chris Gelardi **pointed out recently** in the *Nation*, “Whatever recompense those American families of Taliban victims — who number less than one hundredth of 1 percent of the number of Afghans depending on the frozen funds — deserve, robbing millions of people to such an end would be a mockery of whatever notion of justice to which Biden is appealing.” Our Afghan War has, in other words, ended in an act of theft, while the seeds we’re continuing to plant are going to come to fruition in what’s turning into a hell on earth.

In essence, the U.S., it seems, continues to ensure that crops of death will still be harvested there. With that in mind, consider Denton-Borhaug’s thoughts on the ways in which this country has sacralized its version of global war and what the world is indeed likely to “reap” from it. *Tom*

The Sacralization of War, American-Style

Reaping What We Sow

BY [KELLY DENTON-BORHAUG](#)

Lately, random verses from the Bible have been popping into my mind unbidden, like St. Paul's famous line from Galatians, "A person reaps what they sow." The words sprang into my consciousness when I learned of the death of the 95-year-old Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist [Thich Nhat Hanh](#), who helped encourage Martin Luther King to declare [his opposition](#) to the Vietnam War so long ago.

For decades, I've been moved by Hanh's witness and his writings, which shined such a light on the destructive consequences of our country's militarism. As he [said](#), "To prepare for war, to give millions of men and women the opportunity to practice killing day and night in their hearts, is to plant millions of seeds of violence, anger, frustration, and fear that will be passed on for generations to come."

We reap what we sow. It seems so obvious, but in these endless years of U.S. war-making across the globe, this simple truth seems to have escaped most Americans.

Why? It's not as if no one's noticed that the U.S. has, in so many ways, become a more violent society. Many public intellectuals (progressives and conservatives, too) are [wringing their hands](#) regarding the dangerous uptick in social violence of all sorts in this country, including voluminous [gun purchases](#), distrust and anger, racism, xenophobia, misogyny, rising deaths from avoidable causes like [refusing to be vaccinated](#) — and the list only goes on.

But a thinker like Thich Nhat Hanh stands out from the rest. His insights differed from the norm because he saw so clearly how the seeds of violence in war-culture sprout into a

kind of invasive kudzu vine capable of spreading across every aspect of life, while crushing, asphyxiating, and killing so much along the way.

War-Culture as an Invasive, Destructive Vine

I wonder why the media haven't more thoroughly investigated the psychology that enables our congressional representatives almost unanimously to approve outlandish, ever larger military budgets, no matter how poorly the U.S. military may be doing in the world. The violent infrastructure of this nation is like a noxious vine with destructive results for us all, but few connect this to other rising forms of violence in the U.S. For instance, our leaders [couldn't find it](#) in their hearts to approve an extension of the child tax credit, even though it played a role in lifting [4.6 million children](#) out of poverty. [One study](#) even showed how such cash stipends and tax credits, when provided to poor mothers with babies in the first year of life, resulted in changed brain activity in their children and improved cognitive development.

But West Virginia Democratic Senator [Joe Manchin](#) (along with all the Senate Republicans) refused to support continuing that program, while, like almost every one of those Republicans and most of his Democratic colleagues, he had no problem whatsoever [approving](#) an astronomical defense budget, even in the wake of the Afghan withdrawal. Parents, he insisted, should [have to work](#) to receive any assistance for their children, but the military doesn't have to work for that [\\$738 billion dollars](#) to be approved. There's no requirement for a financial accounting or any demand for evidence that the U.S. military solves "national security" problems of any sort.

And it's not only Manchin. That [budget passed](#) in the Senate by a staggering vote of 88 to 10. (The dissenting lawmakers were Senators Cory Booker, Michael Braun, Kirsten Gillibrand, Mike Lee, Ed Markey, Jeff Merkley, Alex Padilla, Rand Paul, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren.)

While at least [\\$6 trillion dollars](#) were spent on this country's post-9/11 wars, crucial issues like climate change and medical care for the elderly and the rest of us are treated with a bake-sale mentality by our lawmakers, with precious little questioning of that reality. Are our leaders afraid of the weapons-making titans of the military-industrial

complex (of which they are increasingly a part)? Do they really believe that this is the way to build a more secure world? The [3.7 million children](#) whose families just fell back into poverty as a result of the heartless erasure of the Child Tax Credit are only less safe as they fall asleep tonight. What about our nation's responsibility to them?

And here's another all-too-relevant question: Why don't the rest of us step up to make it stop? Where has the [anti-war movement](#) and a movement against that military-industrial-congressional complex been all these years? So many of us are easily distracted, pay too little attention, and focus on our private business, while passing on the seeds of violence, anger, frustration, and fear to each new generation.

Worse yet, in our culture, the military budget is widely viewed as a social, even global good, though both Thich Nhat Hanh and Martin Luther King would have considered this a lie of the first order. The hum of the continuing violence embedded in and eternally reinforced by this country's war-making structure is so constant that most of us don't even notice or question it. The structural violence of a nation that puts more money into its military than [the next 11 military spenders](#) combined — yes, that's right, *combined* — is intolerable, especially because it's guaranteed to [undermine both democracy](#) and [public health](#) here and in the wider world. It shouldn't surprise us that people outside the United States now see us as one of the "[main threats](#) to world peace."

Malignant Normality: Serving the "Pentagod"

What makes such widespread obliviousness to, apathy about, and denial of our addiction to violence so invisible to so many of us? Here, I have to point to one of the moral touchstones in my own life: Jon Sobrino, a priest, writer, and activist who survived the [massacre](#) of eight other Jesuit priests and women domestic workers at the José Simeón Cañas Central American University on the outskirts of El Salvador's capital in 1989. His housemates and colleagues were [murdered in cold blood](#) by the Salvadoran Army (backed at the time by Washington) because the priests were calling for social justice, ministering to people caught in war zones, and encouraging those who were too afraid to speak up. Sobrino himself escaped death only because he happened to be out of the country, lecturing, when the slaughter took place.

His spiritual starting point is one I try to adopt in every project I undertake. The first step, he insists, is always to demonstrate “[honesty toward reality](#).” Now, Sobrino may be a theologian, but his approach applies to us all. We simply can’t assume honesty in this dishonest world. We must work for it. And Sobrino takes this further, because his own life experience taught him that being truly honest about our world is difficult indeed, given that violence and injustice are so often “concealed.”

AND THEN
YOUR SOUL
IS GONE
MORAL INJURY AND
U.S. WAR-CULTURE



Kelly Denton Borhaug

This is where I find his insights so compelling. Being honest about our all-American reality is challenging indeed since the destructive seeds of violence slip so easily and comfortably under the surface of things. This not only makes it difficult to see them clearly, but also much harder to hold accountable those who mischaracterize such incipient, well-funded violence as good, not evil.

Social psychologist Robert Jay Lifton described this as “[malignant normality](#),” the imposition of destructive or violent behavior on Americans as a built-in part of everyday life. Lifton studied the practices of Communist Chinese “thought reform” (once known

Buy the Book here as “brainwashing”) and the work of doctors in the Nazi regime to try to understand how people turn away from reality and get caught up in worlds of dishonesty that sow the seeds of harm and destruction.

In this context, I continue to listen to the voices of military servicemembers and veterans who have opened themselves to the uncomfortable truths about how this country is now reaping what its war-culture has sown globally. They have experienced its lethal growth, destruction, and death all too personally. They know in a way the rest of us often don’t what it means to be acculturated to “malignant normality.” Take, for example, retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel William Astore who recently wrote [a piece](#) for *TomDispatch* about “the Pentagod” he so faithfully served for 20 years. Stationed in “a cathedral of military power,” a more or less literal “temple of doom” under tons of granite in Cheyenne mountain, Colorado, he ministered, he wrote, to the “jealous and wrathful god” of the nuclear-industrial complex.

Eventually, however, he lost his faith in the American god of war, who “always wanted

more.” The bottomless craving of today’s Pentagon is behind more than just the soaring military budget. Remember that, among the latest insanities of that complex, are plans to “modernize” this country’s vast nuclear arsenal at a cost, over the next three decades, of nearly [\\$2 trillion](#). That includes Northrup Grumman’s [\\$264 billion](#) “potential lifecycle” price tag on a new set of land-based nuclear missiles that will be siloed in heartland states like Wyoming and North Dakota. And we call this “good”?

Last December, I was privileged to hear veterans from the [Moral Injury Program](#) at Philadelphia’s Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center testify publicly at a “healing ceremony” about their own encounters with the god of war, the malignant normality of this country’s war-culture, and the seeds of violence it sowed so deeply and painfully in their own lives. One of them was Matthew Abbadusky, who shared a public letter he wrote explaining why he resigned his commission as an Army National Guard chaplain. Its telling first sentence was: “Honesty is the beginning of spiritual life.”

Like Astore, he was no longer willing to serve the U.S. god of war. “I cannot, in good conscience, lend religious and ethical support to a military institution that primarily benefits an economy of corporate, expansionist greed and inconspicuous lust for destruction,” he wrote. His experiences as an infantryman in the 10th Mountain Division, including a 15-month deployment to Iraq and later his work as a military chaplain stateside, “enabled me to arrive at this waypoint on my journey.”

He spoke with passion about “the lifelong visible and invisible wounds” borne by so many of his compatriots in the armed forces:

The morally confounding circumstances a soldier faces on the battlefield are a manifestation of political and corporate moral bankruptcy. The plight they face often places their lives into extreme danger and requires them to make unfathomable decisions, wreaking destruction without, and confusion and chaos within.

Digging Out

To dig ourselves out of the dishonesty, complacency, apathy, and lies of American war-

culture, we're going to need greater honesty about the way Christianity has been weaponized and manipulated to support our society's malignant normality. It's time, for instance, to [call out the dishonesty](#) of using certain verses from the New Testament to sacralize war.

For example, not just chaplains and religious leaders but military commanders, military families, and everyday citizens regularly valorize what soldiers do by referring to the Gospel of John: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."

It is indeed a beautiful, evocative verse that holds so much meaning for so many people. But there's a long history of dishonesty surrounding its use in the context of war-culture. Especially on occasions like Veterans Day or Memorial Day, you'll hear this verse in political speeches, commercials, public-school programs, and ceremonies of all sorts. Exploiting citizens' honest desire to care for veterans, the militarized use of such words hides the truth about how our soldiers have labored at the forefront of this murderous society.

In this way (and there are so many similar examples, religious and otherwise), war is covered with a sacred sheen, while its seeds of violence are normalized and slip ever further from our consciousness. But being honest requires that we face reality and the truth about the consequences of war. As scholar and activist Khury Petersen-Smith of the Institute for Policy Studies [put it](#), "Military violence always requires dehumanization and the denial of rights — and this inevitably corrupts any notions of democracy."

Despite the regular hijacking of that verse from John to soften and conceal the ugly violence of American-style war, those words are part of Jesus's teaching about nonviolent service to others. In fact, biblical scholars agree that the historical Jesus rejected militarized violence. And don't forget that, in the end, he was executed by the Roman imperial power structure.

It's worth asking: Who exactly benefits from making the violence of war into something sacred? Do veterans? Countless times I've heard them testify that such super-valorization and sacralization of war silences any honesty about the reality they experienced. And

that's true not only of people who participated in the violence of the battlefield, but also those like Astore and Abbadusky who struggle to reckon with the roles they played in the structural violence of war-culture, sowing the seeds of destruction and bearing witness to the consequences.

And what do they need from the rest of us? At the very least, we, too, can strive for deeper honesty regarding this country of ours, which is visibly in trouble and still focused on future wars as the best way to address our fears about the threats that face us. We seem to be unable to think any differently, despite evidence that more war will only [make matters worse](#) for the world, as well as for the United States.

Maybe, if we stopped making war and militarism into a sacred enterprise, we'd be more successful in demanding that our political leaders cease their thoughtless approval, year after year, of destructive, ever more gigantic Pentagon budgets.

Maybe, if we began [listening more deeply](#) to veterans, our understanding of the true costs of the war-culture that's engulfed us so disastrously through the first two decades of this century would deepen. And maybe our ability to resist complicity with the way it's been endlessly sowing the seeds of violence, anger, frustration, and fear, generation after generation, would begin to grow.

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