

“The End of Dreams”

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In July 2002 American forces surrounded a compound in Afghanistan. Some women walked out of the compound and were allowed by American forces to flee the impending fight. More time passed, and shots were fired as the Americans waited for air cover. Grenades and bullets peppered the American soldiers. Army Special Forces Sergeant, Layne Morris was blinded in an eye. Shrapnel from another grenade killed Sgt. First Class Christopher J. Speer, who was 28 years old. Speer left behind a widow, Tabitha, and two small children.¹

American soldiers eventually subdued and captured a bloody, bullet-riddled soldier, Omar Ahmad Khadr. Khadr, a Canadian born Muslim with strong and undisputed family ties to Osama bin Laden, was fifteen years old at the time. Sergeant Morris notes “There is no way you can say this is a poor befuddled, brainwashed kid. This is a kid who made a whole lot of decisions.”² Speer’s widow Tabitha wrote of Khadr “Given the opportunity he would do it all over again. He was trained to do exactly what he did, regardless of his age.”³

And here we have the problem; Khadr was trained to do exactly what he did, regardless of his age, and perhaps, because of his age. Is a boy of fifteen a child? Within the United States, yes. A boy of fifteen can not legally vote, drink, watch an R-rated movie, or serve in armed combat. We hope that a fifteen year old boy in the United States would not be taught how to pull a pin out of a grenade without a call being made to Child Protective Services.

Yes, there are children in the United States who carry and use weapons, but I don’t know of any reasonable adult who thinks this is optimal, age appropriate, or right, in part because teenagers, particularly male teenagers are impulsive. Brain scans repeatedly show that male teens are prone to risky behavior as their brain develops into adulthood. Consider fifteen year old boys you know, or have known. How steady was their moral reasoning? How well were they able to negotiate peer pressure and authority figures?

Khadr, who is now 20, and has spent the last five years at Guantanamo Bay, is charged with murder, attempted murder, providing support to terrorism, conspiracy and spying. The conspiracy charges stem from around 1997, when Khadr was ten years old. Your ten year old boys, how is their moral reasoning? Peter Singer, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution asks “What is the precedent we are setting with this unique step,” trying someone as adult for childhood actions, in a war zone, when this child was taught and encouraged to fight by the adults around him?

¹ George Frey, “A Legal Debate in Guantanamo on Boy Soldiers,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2007.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Khadr's Pentagon appointed lawyer, Marine lieutenant colonel Colby Vokey noted that with its charges against Khadr, "The US would become the first country in modern history to try a war crimes suspect who was a child at the time of the alleged violations."⁴ According to David Crane, a former chief war crimes prosecutor for Sierra Leone at the United Nations, child fighters are "as much victims as the people they raped, maimed, and mutilated."⁵ Crane noted that during Sierra Leone's civil war during the 1990's children fought and efficiently committed horrific atrocities, but according to Crane, they didn't possess the intellectual and emotional maturity to make good decisions, so he chose not to prosecute them.

I am certain that Khadr, whose father was a known terrorist and bin Laden deputy (now dead) committed many acts of murder and violence. The Khadr family lived within Osama bin Laden's compound for a time. And he was a child the whole time he lived there, a child. Children have not yet reached the age of moral reasoning and they will do whatever adults teach them. Anything they teach them. Anything that will keep them from starving or dying or being hurt. Anything that will earn them the "affection" of an authority figure. Anything. This is how vulnerable children are.

Children are the most dangerous and efficient fighters around the world today. They are easily manipulated, fearless, resilient, obedient, have a strong desire to please, and they lack moral reasoning. Our worship theme for the year has been energy for what matters, and believe me this matters. Child fighters are stunningly cruel, endlessly available (war makes orphans), and growing in number. In the book, *Cold Mountain*, the hero Inman, (I am about to give away the ending here so plug your ears if you don't want to know it), is killed by a boy. In the movie he is depicted as a teenager, but in the book he is a boy, obedient, isolated, carrying out orders he doesn't understand. It is a crushing ending to a crushing book. In the midst of war our children, our future, become killers.

Before enlisting, our soldiers today should receive a manual on child fighters. As a soldier, you may well have to kill an eight year old boy or girl, before he or she kills you. It is the end of innocence for all involved, the end of dreams, the dream of a good war, a good victory, the good human, the safe family, a community network. Our soldiers fight children, and no one is coming home the same.

In his book *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Ishmael Beah writes the true story of his conscription into Sierra Leone's civil war at twelve years of age. Beah was a normal boy with a father, a mother, a cranky stepmother, siblings, and a grandmother he adored. The day his life literally went to hell, he, his brother, and some friends walked to a neighboring town to participate in a talent contest. Normal twelve year old behavior. Then the bullets and the fighters come and the killing begins, killing everyone. Civilians are used for coverage, for food, as human shields. Nothing is sacred. The inherent worth and dignity is another dream dead on the shifting battlefield of civil war.

Eventually Beah is separated from his brother, and never sees him again. Likewise, the rest of his family, gone, he does not know when or how. He and a pack of boys travel together, scavenging for food, and hiding from the fighters who want to conscript them because children are the best fighters. Villagers fear them so the boys hide in forests and fields until they are caught by fighters who treat them well and then

⁴ *Guardian Unlimited*, online, June 4 2007, "Profile: Omar Khadr" by Mark Tran.

⁵ New York Times, 28.

tell them what adults tell children everywhere when they want them to do their killing for them. Beah writes

The lieutenant went on for almost an hour, describing how rebels had cut off the heads of some people's family members and made them watch, burned entire villages along with inhabitants . . . [then the lieutenant said] "They have lost everything that made them human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil. It is the highest service you can perform for your country."⁶

In this frenzy the boys are introduced to their AK-47. They do not know how to use them or hold them. But they will learn. Beah is thirteen years old. Only much later does he learn that boys on the other side, the boys they are fighting, are being told the same thing about them.

Beah becomes an apparently remorseless, agile killer, capable of killing hundreds of people in one fight. He stops dreaming and remembering. He is given drugs on a daily basis, marijuana and cocaine. The adults ceaselessly show Rambo movies. He and his friends believe, pretend that they are Rambo. Beah writes

My squad was my family, my gun was my provider and protector, and my rule was to kill or be killed . . . We had been fighting for over two years and killing had become a daily activity. I felt no pity for anyone. My childhood had gone by without me knowing, and it seemed as if my heart had frozen.⁷

In 1996, when Beah is fifteen, he is unexpectedly given over by his "family squad" to a UN rehabilitation center. He and the other boys at the rehabilitation unit are horrifying. They don't know how to not fight and kill on a daily basis. They despise and beat their rehabilitation workers. Their withdrawal symptoms are staggering (remember Beah had been a conscripted addict for two years). If these boys were pictured on a reality TV show, the public would demand that they be placed in prison for life. They are violent, addicted, killers. They are impulsive, strong, and immoral. And they are boys. Boys. Children.

After several months Beah begins to have migraines, and then sleep and finally dreams, but not really dreams, nightmares. Beah writes "And now that we had time to think, the fastened mantle of our war memories slowly began to open." When he turns on tap water all he sees is blood. Slowly he begins to remember the faces of people he killed. Several months later he finally dreams the faces of his family again. Through the help of dedicated workers, a compassionate nurse, a long lost uncle, and others, Beah returns to society. They all tell him the same thing over and over and over until he begins to wonder if it is true "It is not your fault."

It might surprise you to know that Beah has since graduated from college (Oberlin in 2004), lives in the United States, is not a practicing addict, and has an absolutely beautiful smile. He is one of the boys that Crane chose not to prosecute. Today he is twenty six years old. As a child, in his early teens, he was taught to be a vicious fighter.

⁶ Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, (2007), 108.

⁷ Beah, 126.

Adults taught him to fight and hate, to become an addict so he wouldn't think, couldn't remember. This is, was, child abuse. For the rest of his life he will probably live with post traumatic stress syndrome. He will be at risk for addiction relapse. He may struggle with trust and intimacy. This was not who he was born to be. This is not who he was raised to be. This is who hateful adults, with the power of life and death, made him into and he will spend the rest of his life living with the memories of what he did for them.

It is estimated that there are 300,000 child fighters in fifty countries around the world today.⁸ At least one of them, Omar Ahmad Khadr, lives under American guardianship at Guantanamo Bay. Khadr was trained to do exactly what he did, regardless of age. This is a kid who made a whole lot of decisions on his own, based on his own, childish, faulty reasoning, after he was taught by adults he trusted and needed to survive.

I feel no safety in prosecuting Khadr. I feel no righteousness. I feel no victory. I feel pain. I feel a broken world where we have chosen to accept the lie that children are solo, responsible agents. Even more – that my country of democracy and enlightenment has chosen to lead the way with this lie. Our American, history making prosecution is an acceptance of his condition as an abused child, an acceptance of the normalcy of the abuse and it is the end our American dream. Our prosecution accepts the lowest common denominator, child abuse, as an acceptable form of child rearing, and then blames the victim, the child for his inadequacies.

I hope to God someone never gives my son a gun at age 10 or 12 or 15. My guess is that Beah's mother prayed the same prayer. I don't think this prayer was shared by Khadr's mother or father who embraced his militant education. But this makes Khadr a victim. As one of Khadr's defense lawyers said "If Omar had had his free choice what he would have chosen to do is ride horses, play soccer and read Harry Potter."⁹

We want Khadr to be the face of villainy, but the villainy belongs to his parents who indoctrinated him and the adult soldiers who taught him to fight. A lesser villainy belongs to those of us who want to condemn a child for our adult hatred and war mongering. Now it is acceptable that children are fighting our battles? It is a sign of weakness if we enlist or prosecute boy or girl soldiers, a sign of our human, parental, adult, leadership failures.

What I find so unbearable is the willful ignorance of the United States government. We keep living with the myth of a good war somewhere out there. A war where no one gets hurt, where anyone who gets hurt is innocent and anyone who hurts someone else is wrong. But being a soldier means both things, being innocent and being wrong. And when we involve children we set them up for soul-wrenching failures of the human spirit because they do not have the intellectual or emotional maturity to bear the burdens of warfare. Adults can barely manage this burden.

I am not a pacifist. There are times for military intervention, and yet, there is no good war, no war without negative human and societal consequences. I once heard a veteran in this congregation speak of his service in WWII, a war I believe the United States needed to enter. This soldier was ordered to throw explosive devices, trained and expected to do this over and over again. It was his duty and I am grateful to him for doing this duty. He did as he was ordered, and taught, and sixty years later he can't

⁸ Beah, jacket cover.

⁹ New York Times.

speak of it without crying, because he remembers the thousands of ghosts of the dead from all those buildings and fields who have walked with him ever since the war. He is proud of his service, grateful for the GI Bill, and he mourns his role in death. Killing never feels good. It is the end of dreams and the beginning of nightmares. And as we get older we realize the enormity of life and death. This man does not cry out of weakness today. He cries out of knowledge which comes with age.

The United States government wanted to show leniency to Khadr given his age, so they sought something less than a life term conviction. For now, they won't have the chance. The charges against him were dismissed because of his designation as an "enemy combatant." Under the new Military Commissions Act only "unlawful enemy combatants" can be charged, and Khadr was never designated as such. Neither were the 385 other prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

I am hazy on the designation and definition of designations, probably because the American military and courts are also hazy on this slippery ground. It could come down to whether or not Khadr was wearing a uniform (therefore part of an army and an enemy combatant), or not (and therefore a terrorist). But then I read Beah's book and laugh to the point of crying. Uniforms? What kind of first world definition are we talking about? Beah fought and killed in a war without a uniform. He was conscripted and never given a uniform, just a gun. We are trying to pretend that only recognized states can foment war. This willful ignorance is also the end of dreams. Adults have always taught others to kill. As children we are vulnerable to this lie. As adults we must resist and speak the truth.

This past weekend I watched part of David Lean's film based on Boris Pasternak's novel, *Doctor Zhivago*. It is the story of a man in love with two women. Much more than this, it is the story of a man, a good, caring man who is a poet and a doctor, who has the spirit crushed out of him by the cruelties and ambiguities of WWI, the Russian civil war and revolution, and humans torn by desperation. This dreamer dies of heart failure in the end of the book. Before then his dreams are killed by cannibalistic children, conscription, and the use of oppression and fear to defeat human values like love, loyalty, sacrifice and kindness. War always exacts a societal toll.

We don't know Omar Ahmed Khadr. He has killed and wounded probably many people. Chances are he is or was an average brainwashed boy like Beah – perhaps more damaged because he was brainwashed longer, perhaps not because he did not kill as many people as Beah (a guess, but we don't know). On the other hand he has likely been tortured, or at least subjected to deprivation at Guantanamo Bay. What will be do with Khadr and the thousands of boys like him that our soldiers meet now and in the future?

Without rehabilitation Khadr is a very dangerous person. With rehabilitation he may still be a very dangerous person. This is the truth of all the boy soldiers. This is the truth of warfare, and modern warfare. There are no good, easy, quick answers. But there is at least one wrong answer, prosecution of boy soldiers. It is the end of dreams, the end of the American dream, and the beginning of nightmares.